

# The 'New' NATO

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I am the Director of a peace research institute, and when the Swedish Government set up my institute exactly 40 years ago they did so largely out of concern for the *threat* to peace that was created by the existence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact as competing military blocs in Europe. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI's) main political imperative at the time, which most people would say it handled reasonably well, was to ensure that its analysis and criticism of the dangers involved was properly balanced between the two sides in East and West. SIPRI's peace research agenda has changed since the great strategic revolution of 1989-90 in Europe, and so (of course) has the Atlantic Alliance itself. This enables reflection on NATO's role in a more open-minded fashion. In that context, this article would concentrate on three quite distinct phases of the Alliance's historical development, posing questions that are either new or can be looked at now in an interestingly different way. Specifically, I will focus on the following:-

- (a) My understanding of the origins and role of the 'old' NATO in the four decades from 1949-1989.
- (b) The first decade of NATO's post cold-war adaptation and, in particular, the complications that developed in this period between NATO's and the European Union's roles in the broader trans-Atlantic relationship.
- (c) The features, driving issues and implications of today's NATO which presents itself as a truly global military actor, and which-in the process-might be leading at least some people to associate the word 'threat' with it all over again.

## 'Old' NATO in a historical US/European Perspective

What we now think of as 'old' NATO was actually a great novelty when it was created. Over the previous 150 years of interaction between an independent United States and Europe,

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distance and tension between the two sides of the Atlantic were actually more frequent and typical than periods of unity or even of harmony. I can think of at least one other historical period when, very much like today, one side accused the other of being much too powerful for a proper international balance, of using military force as its preferred instrument especially to overthrow governments in other regions, of preaching democracy without practising it, and of continuing to employ torture. These were all among the accusations that the founding fathers of the United States threw against the evil empire of old-world Europe when they took up arms to try to free themselves from it and to set up a more pure, peaceful and just political system at the end of the eighteenth century. It should not surprise us that relations between the new US and the main European powers remained distant for a long time after, and also that attitudes towards America were often a divisive matter within Europe itself!

The creation of a trans-Atlantic alliance based on permanent defence guarantees in 1949 was thus in historical terms a revolutionary experiment. It was driven by an equally unique security challenge at the end of Second World War, the need for a strong Western bloc backed by the nuclear weapons of a superpower to hold back the Soviet Union from further expanding its Communist empire in Europe. NATO's role in the Cold War was shaped by the realization that the Soviet/Communist threat in Europe was the single largest challenge, even for the US as a global power - the US's own strategic frontier lay, in a very real sense, in the middle of Germany. The Alliance responded to this prime imperative in two effective ways (at least from the late 1960s): by maintaining a strong defence backed by nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence, but also by 'detente', meaning engagement with the other side to reduce the levels of confrontation and risks of war and to allow some practical cooperation to happen in pursuit of shared interests. It is worth noting, however, that NATO's central and omnipotent role in Western defence was strictly limited to the European theatre-it did not determine most of the things that the US did with its own forces on its own territory and in other regions, and while all kinds of direct and indirect military clashes happened in those decades between the 'West' and 'East' in other parts of the world, they were handled on national initiative or by what would now be called ad-hoc coalitions. Several European members of



NATO, of course, were also preoccupied at the time with the build-down of their own overseas empires and with the purely national responsibility to defend such territories as remained. To complete the picture within Europe, we may note that the European Union (EU) in this period operated more or less on a separate planet from NATO, focussing exclusively on non-military business, but nevertheless playing an important functional part in the Atlantic balance through its ability to talk as an equal with the US on trade policy matters.

As someone who worked personally at NATO during the 1970s, however, I would like to draw attention to some aspects of its role that tend to be forgotten now. You may well have heard the famous remark by the British statesman Lord Ismay that NATO was created 'to keep America in, keep Russia out and keep Germany down'-an extremely *realpolitik* formulation that reminds us there was not much sentimental mystique about NATO at the outset! The reference to Germany is what I would like to point to here, reminding us that NATO's designers also saw it as very much pertinent to recreating democracy and a functioning economy after the damage done by National Socialism within Western Europe itself. NATO served this goal of what might be called internal 'regime change on two counts. These include :-

- (a) By preventing its European members from falling back into a nationalistic and competitive culture of defence.
- (b) By providing the shield under which West Europeans could rebuild their economy while spending far less on armaments than they would have needed to do if left alone. It is true that some Southern European countries spent various periods under dictatorships of military juntas while still being counted as members of NATO, but what was important-and what I witnessed for myself in the 1970s - was how NATO membership helped to discourage and contain any internationally aggressive behaviour by these regimes and also legitimised and reinforced the new democratic governments that eventually took over. I was an eyewitness of NATO's role in containing and calming the very dangerous situation in 1975 when Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus. Moreover, since the world's biggest disarmament and arms control processes at the time were the ones going on



between the US and Soviet Union and their respective alliances in Europe, NATO was quite a school of arms control expertise and it was, in fact, while working as a UK diplomat on the former Mutual Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations that I myself got my first grounding in 'peace' issues! I am stressing these points not so much to idealise the 'old' NATO, but to remind us to ask whether a similar, 'softer' and more ethical side to the Alliance is still in existence or indeed, is possible today.

### Three New Agendas Since 1989

The changes which make that question necessary were triggered first of all by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union in 1989-90. At first many experts thought that NATO also might just fade out of existence when the removal of the great European threat made it redundant, and/or when the lack of such a clear uniting force caused its members to drift apart. Those who expected the Alliance to continue saw it evolving rather fast into a more political than military organisation, with a very wide membership which could even embrace Russia like a more Western-flavoured Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Of course all these precisionist were wrong, and what made them wrong was the continued domination of the US and West European thinking by a new set of severe security problems that moved up to take the place of the Cold War threat. There were actually at least three major and successive shifts in the Euro-Atlantic security agenda rather than just one: the first two of them gave new meat for NATO to chew upon, and helped it repeatedly to renew itself, but all of them pushed the Alliance towards a new European and international niche which I would argue was narrower, not wider, than its original one.

First, the whole decade of the 1990s in Europe was in retrospect dominated by the twin themes of *Crisis Management* and *Enlargement*. The former agenda was shaped by the wars on NATO's doorstep in the Balkans but also by good and bad Western experiences abroad (eg in Somalia), in all cases pushing towards a growing demand for military forces specialised for robust long-range interventions and for new forms of civil-military co-ordination in multi-functional operations. The enlargement agenda included two waves of very significant expansion of NATO's membership



and territory into Central Europe, where it once again became a teacher and a guarantor of democracy and of the cooperative approach to defence, but it also involved the tough conundrum of how to maintain a stable and non-zero-sum relationship with Russia while the latter was not and in practice could not be a candidate. History should, I think, conclude that despite some very difficult passages with both the US and Russia around the mid-1990s, the striking feature was how well NATO adapted to these tasks: managing to maintain its unity and *raison-d'etre* through change in spite of change or by resisting it. At the same time, the division of labour between NATO and EU started gradually to shift during this period and became more complicated.

The EU also engaged in enlargement and building new relations with Russia, and because of the nature of the integration process, joining the EU actually involved deeper transformations and new relationships than in the NATO case. Through NATO enlargement, the US might be creating new members and neighbours in Europe, but the American people did not actually have to live alongside them and open their frontiers and potentially their jobs to them as the Europeans did!

At the end of the period and after the practical and political frustrations felt by Europeans over their performance in the Kosovo crisis, the EU decided to launch its own military crisis management capability that might also be used independently from NATO in the framework of the so-called new European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

At the higher strategic level, the fading of shared military threats in Europe started to make Europe less of a defence priority for the US and military and defence affairs generally less of a priority for Europe: thus the *relative* part that NATO played in the thinking of each side was bound gradually to become less dominant.

Finally, we should note that crisis management tasks outside Europe in the 1990s were still met without using NATO, though the EU did get involved in some of the related crises with mediation, aid, sanctions etc.

From 11 September 2001, the Euro-Atlantic focus shifted quite sharply to the *Global New Threats* of terrorism, Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation and related issues like financial



crime, travel safety, controls on technology transfer and trade. The implications for the Alliance were symbolised by the pivotal events when NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty on 12 September 2001 to show that the other Allies were ready to help the US just as in a Cold-War attack; but the US declined to take up their offer in any practical way. More starkly than at any time in the 1990s, it became clear that :-

(i) *NATO was no longer central to US-Europe interactions as a consensus - and policy-forming forum.*

(ii) That the *instruments* NATO could offer, while turning out to be highly relevant, for example, pursuing operations in Afghanistan after the US's initial coalition attack, were *essentially military and operational ones* growing out of its long-term defence role and assets.

NATO does not have the resources and legal competencies to handle the wide range of internal ('homeland') security measures and travel security measures required in the new threat environment; or to implement technology transfer and export controls and other solutions for specific proliferation dangers; or to be the channel for the Western community to interact with other world powers and groupings affected by the new agenda. The EU does at least in principle have all these possibilities, and it started to develop them after 2001 both for the purpose of negotiation and cooperation with the US (notably on homeland security and travel and trade controls), and to protect its own security interests. As a result of this, the action now has largely moved outside Europe (to Afghanistan and Iraq), the main flow of US/Europe policy interactions (whether negative or positive) in 2001-5 went either through US-EU channels - in the process highlighting the inadequacy of the latter or through fora with wider participation by world powers such as the UN Security Council and G8. (I would argue that the same was very broadly true of US-Russia interaction).

Of course, this story would not be complete without dwelling on the *major splits* of 2002-03 both among Europeans, and between the US and Europeans in general, over various aspects of the Iraq affair and especially the coalition invasion of March 2003. In retrospect, we can probably judge that these had less overall impact on the EU than NATO mainly because :-



(a) The US's new preference to use 'coalitions of the willing' for the most urgent military tasks was taking potential work away from NATO, not the EU.

(b) The EU had too much other business going on - forcing the Europeans to keep on working together willy-nilly-that was neither dependent on Atlantic relations nor linked to the new-threats agenda. After March 2003, moreover, the EU's leaders went through a very public process of pulling themselves together as they realised that neither the opposers nor the supporters of the Iraq invasion had made any material impact on the way the Americans played things, and that Europe could only expect to have influence in future if it could find its own agenda and push it collectively. The results were the EU's first-ever *Security Strategy Document*, a separate strategy on WMD and the opening of the European negotiations with Iran, several additions to the machinery of the ESDP including a defence industrial agency the European Defence Agency (EDA), and an independent EU peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. I would argue that although NATO also pulled itself together with some success by end-2003 to focus on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan, the new start at NATO HQ was neither so political and comprehensive in character nor, perhaps, so irreversible as what was going on in all the EU organs. At the same time, however, we should note that the *enlargement* agenda including the Russian angles continued to be handled quite smoothly by both institutions, and in particular with little US-European friction. In retrospect, we may theorise that the Big Bang enlargement completed in 2004 was actually made inevitable by the 11 September 2001 crisis - inasmuch as the new threats created an obvious logic for building a single, largest possible integrated community of States in Europe to deal with *all* the continent's security challenges, and also gave Russia a rationale for continuing to work with the West on overarching common interests.

Since 2004 in particular, new or renewed attention has been drawn to a third layer of the security agenda: the *threats to Human Security* that may not be, or are only partly, man-made but have great and widespread destructive power. Epidemics like AIDS, SARS and bird 'flu', natural disasters (tsunami, hurricane,



earthquake), larger climate change processes, problems with supply of energy and other strategic commodities, and possible infrastructure breakdowns became an important component of security discourses. The last years have also seen a gradual turning of attention back to the problems of non-European conflict and their linkage with underdevelopment, 'weak state' phenomena and so on (the word Darfur is a sufficient symbol). The institutional implications may be noted very quickly here because it is evident that NATO does not have a role other than providing military assets where relevant, as it did just now for earthquake relief in Kashmir or in logistic support for African Union (AU) troops in Sudan. On the other hand, human security problems that both emerge and impact hardest in the social and economic spheres are right in the middle of the EU's permanent agenda, and all pressures are now pushing the EU to treat them more consciously as security issues and to develop more effective joint positions on them. (The crisis of January 2006 over Russian gas supplies through Ukraine is one good example, leading as it did within days or even hours to a call for a united and hard-headed EU 'energy security' policy.) The latest new agenda even has repercussions for the EU's own defence personality: the renewed focus on non-European conflicts is leading the EU to make more and more types of crisis interventions outside its own security zone (eg in Aceh, Georgia, Moldova and on the border of the Gaza Strip) - at the same time as NATO has passed most peace operations in the West Balkans apart from Kosovo Force (KFOR) over to the EU so as to free its own capacities for new global tasks. Lastly, the logic and pressure for the US and Europeans to cooperate on this whole 'human security' agenda is overwhelming - not least because the good answers very often involve the principles of good governance that both sides share - but sometimes their approaches coincide very closely, other times they have to negotiate from clearly different starting positions (e.g. on the Kyoto process or birth control, or on the role that arms control and disarmament may play). In either case, for none of these issues does the line of Atlantic management go through NATO.

The question of what has happened to the classic NATO function of ensuring the direct defence of Europe itself is pertinent to understanding NATO's changing role. What seems clear is that NATO is not actively planning for or engaging in it any more. NATO



command HQs have been cut down and have lost their geographical character so that there is just one big one for operations (now meaning operations abroad) and one for innovation (which means becoming better prepared for operations abroad). NATO does very few exercises and those it holds in Europe are based on counter-terrorist or similar scenarios. There is actually no general NATO military plan for war on European territory any more. As you may know, the US forces in Europe are being further cut and moved Southwards and Eastwards with the main view of being able to reach non-European theatres quickly; and there are no foreign forces or nuclear forces at all (in peacetime) on the territory of all NATO's new members including the Eastern part of Germany. For all these and other reasons, the new Allied countries (and any others still to join) are having nothing like the original NATO experience of direct and permanent military integration including American and Canadian comrades on Europe's own soil. The politically influential Article Five exists but if some had reason to doubt even in the Cold War whether Washington would always and automatically risk the US to save Europe from any kind of attack, the reasons for questioning that are surely much greater now! None of this would matter if we were sure that the European homeland will never again face a direct or indirect attack from State enemies, and also that European countries need no more education in how to keep their defence culture democratic and denationalised. The fact is that quite a lot of Europeans, notably in the East and North, don't actually feel anything like certain about those points yet. The question therefore hangs over us of whether the EU needs to and will eventually move more openly into the role of a direct, military defender of its own territories; followed by the very big question of whether it could ever play that role credibly, and if so how - including the question recently highlighted by President Chirac of European nuclear deterrence!

### **Today's NATO: World Policeman, or...?**

While concentrating on NATO's present posture and ambitions, what I find rather striking is how relatively narrow this set of questions are. It is no longer NATO's role on which we pin our hopes or our criticisms as to how President Putin is to be handled, or how the cause of disarmament might be rescued, or how anti-democratic, xenophobic and populist tendencies within Europe's own societies are to be checked. That is a real change from 55



years and even from 15 years ago. I do not mean here that the Alliance is necessarily doomed and dwindling away, but rather that it plays an increasingly specialised albeit vital and forceful role in the spectrum of Western security instruments.

The potentially global military role that NATO has undertaken since its Ministers approved a policy document in mid-2002 has ended any kind of geographical limit on its activities. We have seen that its actions in this respect can range from tough 'peace enforcement' of the Kosovo and now potentially the Afghanistan type, to the more moderately challenging peacekeeping that Stabilisation Force (SFOR) until recently did in Bosnia-Herzegovina, to purely humanitarian interventions as in the Kashmir earthquakes and indirect help to other peacekeepers as in Sudan.

### **Will and Resources?**

This set of examples shows that all NATO's members have been able to agree on a meaningful number and variety of military missions that they want to carry out in the Alliance framework: even under the two Administration of George W. Bush when important forces in Washington have been pressing for the use of ad hoc coalitions in preference to any fixed multilateral grouping. In Afghanistan, less than two years after launching a war on the Taliban with only a picked handful of partners, the US was urging NATO to take command within the resulting UN peacekeeping operation (ISAF). Now, two years further on again, it [is using] every kind of pressure to get the Netherlands to put more troops into ISAF and, as we know, it would like this NATO operation and its own remaining warlike operations against Al-Qaeda to be bound together under a single command. It is fair to see this as one piece of evidence that the extreme 'de-institutionalization' of US intervention policy that was once called for by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has not proved lasting or consistent, and perhaps was never really sustainable. On the other hand, we should note that both in Afghanistan and Iraq the US has turned back to multilateral institutions for what might be called the 'cleaning-up' phase after taking the initial and sharper action essentially on its own responsibility. In the case of Afghanistan, there was a strong consensus in Europe and, indeed, elsewhere that the task of clean-up and consolidation was a worthy and justified one; but as you will have noted, in the case of Iraq many Allies essentially refused to come in and do the US's 'dirty work' so that NATO's only current



collective commitment there is for a military training programme carried on partly outside the country.

What is the general lesson of this for NATO's future? In practical terms the Alliance undoubtedly remains the world's best institution to launch tough, strong and rapid military action, whether for the extended self-defence of its own members or to meet the international community's needs for enforcing and keeping the peace. Against the background of (at least) current US policies, however, it seems to me that we cannot feel very certain about the following issues which include :-

(a) Whether the US will ever consider using NATO again for the first phase of action against what it sees as an urgent and present danger to American interests.

(b) Whether all the Allies would agree with Washington on the need and justification for the use of force in the given situation.

(c) If the US uses a coalition instead and comes to NATO later for the cleaning-up phase, whether the other Allies' reaction will be more like the positive one in Afghanistan or the very reserved one in Iraq.

Of course, even if we took a pessimistic view on all these points it would still be possible for NATO to take on actions of the humanitarian kind as in Kashmir or Darfur; but here I would recall that the services it can offer are limited to the military side while the EU, for example, can also offer police and aid workers, economic and technical inputs and political mediation. Moreover, enough of NATO's cold-war image still remains to make it a very tricky proposition to consider using it in the former Soviet area or even in the heart of the Middle East, so that it is no wonder we have seen the EU being approached instead for tasks on the borders of Georgia and the Gaza Strip, and prospectively in Moldova.

I may more briefly mention the practical worries about the ability of European Allies to make the contribution necessary to mount successful missions alongside the US in a NATO framework. There are several levels of this problem, starting with the famous trans-Atlantic technology gap that is still widening overall and that poses obvious problems for inter-operability. However, NATO has made progress since 2002 in planning for a very tightly focussed



and integrated set of US and European units to work together in the specific context of the NATO Reaction Force (NRF); and in the medium term it is intriguing to wonder if the US itself may return to the idea of more modest and 'appropriate' technology as a result of the lessons about the vital human component of peacekeeping that the US Army has learned in Iraq. Probably a bigger problem in the near term is the sheer lack of available and qualified forces in most European NATO nations, partly because some of these nations have been too slow in reorganising their defence structures for the new 'expeditionary' tasks, but also because so many European troops are tied down already in quite large EU operations in the Balkans, in UN peacekeeping missions, in Afghanistan and for the European members of the coalition—with the US in Iraq. The Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) and other US generals are starting to get acutely frustrated with what they see as European reluctance and delays, and SACEUR has been arguing that NATO should have something more like a pool of pre-assigned forces always under central command and with central funding so that they can be sent off in urgent cases without need of separate national decisions.

That sounds like a logical way forward but, as an outsider to the current debate at NATO HQ, I can see some pretty large problems with it. NATO has always been an inter-governmental not a supranational organisation and even in the Cold War its nations would have had to give their separate consents for war against the Warsaw Pact. Why should its nations throw away their power of free decision now when their numbers are larger and their interests objectively more diverse than ever, and when the tasks being proposed are not actually in the shared defence of their own territory but of an optional or ad hoc kind in probably some quite different region? And how could NATO's limited central bureaucracy be trained and trusted to manage such important common resources when it lacks all the apparatus that the EU has painstakingly built up in the European Commission and Court of Justice, with at least some democratic supervision by the European Parliament, to ensure the honest and transparent stewardship of collective funds? (Not that the EU itself has yet succeeded to anyone's satisfaction in that)

### **Law and Legitimacy**

The underlying problem here is one that also brings us back



to the question of NATO's authority and legitimacy for action in the world at large. Unlike the EU, NATO does not make laws for its members, so that it could not (for instance) solve the problem of consent for the use of a central force pool by getting its members to reach a formal legally binding agreement in advance on the conditions that would apply. In the Cold War, it never occurred to us to see the legal basis for NATO action as a problem because the one kind of action it was preparing for was the direct defence of its own members' territory against an attack, a cause clearly covered and legitimised by Article 51 of the UN Charter. Today that is the one thing that NATO's forces are *not* designed for, and when they go out to act on other people's territory they have to face the same question as any other organisation would be asked: where is its legal base or international legal mandate?

If NATO is requested to help as in Darfur or if the UN provides a mandate as in Afghanistan, there should be no problem. In 1999, NATO's action against Serbian forces in Kosovo and against Serbia-Montenegro itself did not at first have a UN mandate but was justified by the Allies as a sort of combination of response to potential genocide, extension of existing peacekeeping responsibility in former Yugoslavia, and even the extended self-defence of European territory. If a similar case happened outside Europe's own frontiers, however, I am not at all so sure whether people both inside and outside NATO would be equally accepting of the Alliance's right to use deadly force. We come back here to the same question I was posing in a more political context just before; will the US want to wait for a UN mandate before using NATO against what it sees as a real security threat somewhere out in the world; but if it doesn't wait, will the other Allies agree to let NATO's flag and name be attached to the action? It seems to me that this question is unresolved for the moment and as long as it stays open, there is reason both for NATO's friends to worry about its future and for some people out in the world to worry about NATO itself. As my last word, however, I would note that the even bigger issue behind this one is the failure of the world community to agree on a definition of what is legitimate and non-legitimate today in the uses of military coercive power beyond Article 51; and while the story of last year's UN Summit makes clear enough why states should be divided over this, the fact that they are is a very serious matter not just for the future of NATO but for world peace in general.