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NATO: IN SEARCH OF A STRATEGIC CONCEPT FOR THE MODERN AGE

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Introduction

NATO had clear definition and focus during the Cold War. Since the events of 1989 and the removal of the single threat of the USSR, many have questioned the purpose and utility of the Atlantic Alliance.¹ This paper will illustrate that the iron curtain may have been drawn for good, but the re-emergence of Russia in recent years as an aggressor and multifaceted world threat is a continued cause for concern. The paper will also highlight the fact that dealing with Russia is far from NATO's only threat. Peace and stability is inherently fragile – Iraq, Syria, the Middle East, the Sahel, Libya are only a few examples of the constantly changing and emerging threats that the alliance must deal with.²

Over its 68 years, the organisation has evolved in three main phases; The Cold War up until 1989, the five year transition period during which main focus shifted outside Western Europe, and the period to present marked by increased alliance membership, continuous operations and strategic policy re-think.³ The evolution is reflective of the modern political landscape which dictates that any political alliance must have the flexibility to deal rapidly with security threats from a range of adversaries. What has been questioned, however, is the relevance of NATO against the lack of one singular adversary

¹ Gulnur Aybet and Rebecca Moore. "NATO in Search of a Vision". Washington D.C: Georgetown University press, 2010.

² NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_112388.htm?selectedLocale=en

³ Yonah Alexander and Richard Prosen. "NATO From Regional to Global Security Provider". Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, xxii.

and whether such a large alliance can maintain the flexibility and vision to meet contemporary security challenges.⁴

This paper will begin by contrasting and analysing why NATO has been so much more active throughout the 2nd and 3rd phases than it was during the 1st phase as described by Alexander and Prosen.⁵ In the subsequent section it will examine how the organisation has evolved in the face of its rapidly altered environment through analysis of the strategic concepts published in 1991, 1999 and 2010. Finally, it will establish the direction in which NATO must seek to evolve in the near future if it is to remain a credible political alliance for the next 68 years. It will defend the thesis: *“NATO failed to anticipate its post-Cold War role accurately and the current (3rd) iteration of its strategic concept is still lacking, leaving the alliance in need of a more focussed and collaborative concept if it is to remain a credible actor in an increasingly fragmented security environment.”*

NATO’s Post-Cold War Awakening.

NATO spent the 40 years up until 1989 with a singular, if slightly ambiguous focus; it was formed by nations of Europe, Canada and the U.S. to provide collective security. Although never formally defined, the intent was to defend against the growing substantial might of the communist USSR.⁶ The success of the union during this period is best judged against the lack of nuclear Armageddon in the years up until the demise of the USSR. In essence, this period benefitted from the simplicity of its focus. The clarity

⁴ Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti and Benjamin Zyla. “NATO Beyond 9/11 – The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance”. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p321-323.

⁵ Yonah Alexander and Richard Prosen. “NATO From Regional to Global Security Provider”. Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, xxii.

⁶ Mark Smith. “NATO Enlargement During the Cold War”. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, p18.

of the binding agreement between participatory states defined in Articles 4 and 5 of the Washington Treaty was the keystone guaranteeing the strength and resilience of the organisation.⁷ In truth, NATO took part in no military operations at all during the Cold War, but despite this indicator of potential redundancy, the alliance grew steadily.⁸ This growth in the face of inaction demonstrates the perceived value represented by the alliance for the nations of Europe and the west.

In examining the transformation of the organization post the Cold War, it is necessary to consider, briefly, the numerous military activities undertaken by NATO during this period, from its first shots in the Bosnian campaign in February of 1994 all the way to present day involvement.

NATO first saw military action in 1990 in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait with the deployment of AEW aircraft in the Mediterranean and subsequently a rapid reaction force in 1991. Intervention in Bosnia began in 1993 with hostilities reaching their peak in 1994/95 although the NATO presence remained until 2004. The Kosovo crisis resulted in a short but intensive NATO led bombing campaign in 1999 with a residual peacekeeping role still in place today. The terror attacks of September 2001 saw NATO invoke Article 5, collective defence, for the first and only time. This led to numerous official actions by the Alliance, but most notably, it took control of the whole Afghan mission in 2003 at the request of Germany and the Netherlands and formed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The mission concluded in 2014 but a security force remains in place. Although NATO did not lead the mission in Iraq during

⁷ Robert Rauchhaus. "Explaining NATO Enlargement". London: Frank Cass Publishing, 2001, p4.

⁸ Mark Smith. "NATO Enlargement During the Cold War". Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, p162-173.

Gulf War 2, it did form a training mission in the country which endured from 2004 until 2011. NATO conducts the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, a mission it has held since 2009. The latest action by NATO was the Libyan campaign in 2011 involving NATO embargo operations, no fly zone policing and strike missions lasting until October of that year. Once again, NATO forces remain to provide security advice to the region.⁹

In the 27 years since the demise of the USSR, NATO has had involvement in seven separate missions – a stark contrast to the cold war years. This gives rise to the question of what changed. Did the end of the cold war bring about such a change in the political environment across the globe that conflicts emerged with frequency and significance never before seen that the largest political alliance was compelled to act? Or did NATO suddenly find itself with the capacity to deal with conflicts that it simply did not have the appetite for under the “old rules”? Both hypotheses above are worthy of separate research and while this paper does not intend to answer each in any detail, it is important to understand their significance in establishing NATO’s position today and in the future.

In response to the 1st hypothesis, while the deplorable actions of Karadzic or Milosevic in the Balkans cannot ever be explained away as political inevitability in the face of such regional change, the outbreak of conflict in the region was predictable in post-Cold War context.¹⁰ By comparison, the events since 9/11 are not specifically linked to the end of the cold war, but are instead representative of the changing dynamic in

⁹ NATO - Operations and missions: past and present.
http://www.nato.int/cps/eu/natohq/topics_52060.htm

¹⁰ Jeffrey Morton, Paul Forage, Stefano Bianchini, Craig Nation. Reflections on the Balkan Wars: Ten Years After the Break-up of Yugoslavia. Hampshire: Palgrave, 2004.

world politics which includes powerful non-state actors, religious extremists and failed/failing states.¹¹

In response to the 2nd hypothesis, the Suez crisis in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s are both representative examples of conflicts where NATO members involved attempted to garner support from the Alliance.¹² In both cases, NATO members lobbied for international involvement in their respective conflicts under the umbrella that the actions of the adversary had potential consequences for the security of the affected states so grave that they would have been tacit threats to the security of all member states and that there was a need to prove the strength of the alliance. NATO declined to act in either case due to political undertones in the Suez¹³, and a failure to satisfy Article 5 in Vietnam.¹⁴ These examples illustrate the fact that NATO inaction in “other conflicts” during the cold war had valid explanations which were not related to a lack of capacity.

A more cynical view on “what changed” is that without the Soviet threat, NATO had to be seen to prove its worth on the international stage or face an inevitable demise. Numerous detractors argue that NATO is doomed to failure. Ted Galen Carpenter declared that “NATO has outlived whatever usefulness it had. Superficially, it remains an impressive institution, but it has become a hollow shell – far more a political honor society than a meaningful security organisation”.¹⁵ Critics argue that the expanded set of tasks represented in the previous section of this paper, and evident in the current Strategic

¹¹ Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti and Benjamin Zyla. “NATO Beyond 9/11 – The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance”. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p13-17.

¹² Veronica Kitchen. “The Globalisation of NATO”. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2010.

¹³ Ibid, p31-35.

¹⁴ Ibid, p46, 47.

¹⁵ Ted Galen Carpenter. “NATO at 60: A Hollow Alliance, Policy Analysis no 635”. Washington DC: Cato Institute. March 30, 2009, p1.

Concept, has brought with them a discord amongst the allies about how to achieve them. This, many believe, is the root of the Alliance's problems and is slowly eroding its relevance.¹⁶

The Search for Focus and a Concept for the Modern Threat

The most difficult obstacle for the Alliance has been the establishment of an enduring strategic concept from which to base its future vision. This section will analyse the changing focus evident in the three strategic concepts published since the end of the cold war. It will ascertain what has been behind NATO's failure to get it right in strategic concepts published in 1991¹⁷, revised in 1999¹⁸ and again 2010¹⁹.

NATO has found itself on the back foot reacting to changes in its political and threat environment. The predictability of the Cold War was in stark contrast to the sporadic and non-linear nature of the modern threats the alliance faces. The 1991 strategic concept set out NATO's post-cold war essential purpose as, "...safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter."²⁰ In order to satisfy this core purpose the Alliance described four core tasks which, in very simple terms, can be summarised as, acting as an agent for democratic change in the Euro region, acting as a forum for member consultations on vital interests, defence against any threat of aggression and

¹⁶ David Yost. "NATO's Balancing Act" Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014, p2.

¹⁷ Gulnur Aybet and Rebecca Moore. "NATO in Search of a Vision". Washington D.C: Georgetown University press, 2010. p37-41

¹⁸ Ibid, p40-41.

¹⁹ Yonah Alexander and Richard Prosen. "NATO From Regional to Global Security Provider". Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, p236.

²⁰ North Atlantic Council, "Strategic Concept". Nov 7, 1991, para 15.

preservation of European strategic balance.²¹ It should be no surprise that in 1991, NATO was still pre-occupied with the potential threat from the east. The Russian threat was mentioned in the '91 concept as the single most significant factor which was likely to alter the balance in the region.²²

The period of the 90's saw initiatives such as the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty which led to massive force reductions. It saw outreach towards the former Warsaw Pact countries through the formation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and Partnership for Peace (PfP).²³ The latter, in particular saw the softening of attitude towards Russia, instead replaced with the hope of open dialogue and cooperation. The period also saw increased tensions in Eastern Europe as detailed previously. Bosnia, in particular, was a representative success for NATO as leader of the peace enforcement mission. It saw the integration of effort by new states including Russia and cemented NATO in its revised role of engagement rather than intervention. However, it did highlight a number of issues where the Alliance was ill prepared. Speed of reaction, lift capacity, unity of effort and consensus planning were all tested and found wanting in this period.²⁴

Although a little vague in content, the '91 concept stood firm in relation to its intent to act as an agent for change, provide facility as a forum and deter threat. But with Russia now on board PfP and taking active roles in peacemaking operations, the strategic

²¹ Ibid, para 20.

²² Gulnur Aybet and Rebecca Moore. "NATO in Search of a Vision". Washington D.C: Georgetown University press, 2010. P40-41.

²³ Yonah Alexander and Richard Prosen. "NATO From Regional to Global Security Provider". Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, p94-95.

²⁴ Veronica Kitchen. "The Globalisation of NATO". London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2010, p115-117.

balance aspect required review. So too was there a need to address the volatility which had become apparent. Crisis management became the new focus for the 1999 concept. Security and consultation remained. So did deterrence but it expanded the remit from just Europe out to the Euro-Atlantic arena, including Turkey, Eastern Canada and the US.²⁵ With new NATO command centers being established throughout Europe, empowering previous soviet bloc nations, NATO was keen to offer effective contribution to emerging crises.²⁶ Aybet and Moore acknowledge the steps taken in the 1999 review to address the need for enhanced preparedness for crisis response, but they argue that the strategy formed only really tackled the central issues under discussion by the council in the late 90's. The need for a forward looking policy was still unaddressed.²⁷

The lack of foresight was only too apparent with the events of September 2001 which brought a swing in focus reminiscent of the Cold War. NATO in the 1990s was focussed on upholding new norms of liberal democracy, human rights and an open door policy towards diplomacy. The sudden, if not entirely unpredictable return of a singular enemy drew focus away from NATO's collective security in Europe and returned it abruptly back to one of collective defence. 9/11 and subsequently, the NATO mission in Afghanistan, drew NATO out of area in response to Article 5. It was defending the security of all member states in a distant front.²⁸ The 1999 Strategic Concept had mistakenly let fly the core values of collective defence. Having embraced the "old enemy", it allowed its focus to be drawn from the harder line of Article 5 assistance in

²⁵ Veronica Kitchen. "The Globalisation of NATO". London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2010, p88-89.

²⁶ Yonah Alexander and Richard Prosen. "NATO From Regional to Global Security Provider". Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, p95.

²⁷ Gulnur Aybet and Rebecca Moore. "NATO in Search of a Vision". Washington D.C: Georgetown University press, 2010. P41.

²⁸ Ibid, p42-45.

collective defence, instead focussing on establishing democratic norms on its expanding borders. Only 2 years “in print”, and the catastrophic events in the USA had rendered the 1999 Strategic Concept close to irrelevant.

Having established itself as the bastion of moral values in the 1990’s and now simultaneously facing a prolonged battle for state survival against non-state actors in Afghanistan, the Alliance had no option but to realign by means of another Strategic Concept.²⁹ Having failed to anticipate future environments twice before, and written while the Afghan mission was in full flight, it should hardly be surprising that the 2010 Concept encompasses huge breadth of focus. It is less vague than the previous concepts but the scope is simply enormous. In adopting 3 overlapping task categories, the concept addresses collective defence but the wording of the core task assumes no boundaries. Wording such as “... members will always assist each other against attack...” and “NATO will deter and defend against any threat...” has the potential to significantly overcommit. Similar language in reference to crisis management, “...address the full spectrum of crises – before, during and after...” promises limitless commitment to an undefined situation.³⁰ Such foolhardy statements will challenge the principles of consensus that are so critical to Alliance cohesion and would place the organisation under threat of internal collapse should it be called upon to deliver on its overly expansive conceptual promise.³¹

²⁹ David Yost. “NATO’s Balancing Act” Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014, p13.

³⁰ North Atlantic Council. “Active Engagement, Modern defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.” November 19, 2010, Para4.

³¹ David Yost. “NATO’s Balancing Act” Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014, p20.

In contrast, it is in the 3rd core task of cooperative security that the concept is too restrictive. As this paper will illustrate in the following section, cooperation holds the key to NATO success, but its only stated tasks of “...arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament...” are reminiscent of a cold war focus which is of limited relevance in a modern global threat environment.³²

Reflections on the Future Strategic Concept

If the last 28 years have been volatile and unpredictable, then the next 28 are shaping up to be even more of a challenge to the policy makers. Roland Paris of the Centre for International Policy Studies describes a number of the emerging challenges facing NATO. First and foremost is “Russia’s emergence as an openly revisionist power whose actions threaten to replace a rules-based order in Europe with one governed by the application of military power and economic coercion”.³³ Additionally, he directs attention to the unravelling of political order in states in the Middle East and North Africa. China’s actions in her region and the South China Sea may not be of direct concern to most NATO states, but economically and politically, the rise of potentially the next great power cannot be overlooked. The Assad regime and Syria has seen recent unilateral action by the US as a result of escalation by the domestic actors, and the rapidly developing nuclear capability of a remarkably unstable North Korean regime all points to a perfect storm of world instability and politico-military turmoil.³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Roland Paris, Centre for International Policy Studies. <http://www.cips-cepi.ca/2014/06/18/nato-must-face-looming-challenges-now-not-later/>

³⁴ General Petr Pavel, Chairman, NATO Military Committee. http://www.nato.int/cps/tr/natohq/opinions_124128.htm?selectedLocale=en

So in the face of non-linear aggression through disinformation, cyber-attacks and mobilizations as has been commonplace by Russia in her dealings with her geographical neighbours, NATO can field its more familiar concepts of deterrence with some expectation of success. But in the face of non-state actors, failed states and religious radical elements, evident in the MENA region, such traditional methods of threat management will not suffice. A multilayered strategy of influence is what is called for.³⁵

The breadth of the global threats facing NATO, directly or indirectly, through the Alliance as a whole or through individual nation concerns, has been discussed. NATO's three current core tasks of collective defence, crisis management and co-operative security could be argued to adequately provide the vision and concepts to deal with all the modern threats. This paper argues, however, that this is only the case because of the vagueness of those tasks. In practical terms, NATO cannot be specific enough to present a credible concept because it is not structured to provide effective deterrence across such an enormous mandate.

In offering a solution, it would be too simplistic to simply suggest an 'enhancement of collective defence' or 'a better mix of tools to assist in crisis management'. What NATO needs is something new. Given the sheer scale of the tasks in hand, NATO must move from being the defender itself, managing and conducting the security, as we saw in Afghanistan.³⁶ In appreciating that it cannot possess every tool for every purpose, it must instead, embrace the role of global enabler. Hallams, Ratti and Zyla speak at length of the numerous relationships NATO has with transnational partners

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti and Benjamin Zyla. "NATO Beyond 9/11 – The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance". Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, Ch5.

such as the EU or NORDEFECO.³⁷ General Pavel, during his 2015 speech at the EU described how an integrated approach to security with regional organisations represented the best opportunity for optimized results in security provision.³⁸ This paper goes further to suggest that NATO must enable state, non-state and NGO actors in threat regions to play a far greater part in managing regional security. Exporting western democracy is key, but not if it is always served on the tip of a TLAM. The strengthening of world order through the establishment and/or support of effective international institutions is the new core task which must be incorporated into NATO's Strategic Concept. In doing so, NATO will signify its acceptance that the current world situation with numerous interlinked threats and crises can never be influenced by one single conglomerate actor to the satisfaction of all others.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated NATO's lack of vision evident in the published concepts in 1991 and 1999. There is evidence of significant failings to anticipate the real intent of a rejuvenating Russia, and to counter the ambitions of a select web of anti-western extremists. The 1991 concept did not anticipate the regional crises which erupted out of a changing Eastern Europe. The 1999 review was geared towards liberal democratic values and collective security but lost focus on the NATO core of collective defence. In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the heat of Afghanistan with China, Korea and Russia considered aggressors, the 2010 review has revealed an expansionist NATO with

³⁷ Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti and Benjamin Zyla. "NATO Beyond 9/11 – The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance". Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, Ch8.

³⁸ General Petr Pavel, Chairman, NATO Military Committee.
http://www.nato.int/cps/tr/natohq/opinions_124128.htm?selectedLocale=en

breadth and scope increased to such a degree that achieving consensus on action, the keystone to the Alliance's survival, would be unachievable.

NATO must re-balance its Strategic Concept in such a way that it establishes itself as enabler, acknowledging the unique dynamics of each of the modern world threats. No longer can a large and complex alliance expect to "engineer" consensus amongst its members in the face of a multitude of threats reflecting differing interpretation for each actor involved. It must not turn away from the keystone of collective defence of its members, but it must acknowledge that the concept of collective defence for the 21st century is significantly different to that during the cold war, and the scope of the threats is simply too wide to predict.

Cooperation and collaboration through regional partners and international organisations are the key to the success of the Alliance but it must act now to refocus before the next international crisis presents a challenge which proves to be one step too far for survival.

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