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NATO's New Strategic Concept: Rising to the Occasion

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The process that should lead to a new NATO strategy has been launched at this year's spring Summit in Strasbourg/Kehl, where the Alliance celebrated its 60th anniversary. This strategy, to be approved at the next Summit in Lisbon at the end of 2010 (indeed, another Lisbon strategy), will replace the current Strategic Concept that was adopted at the Washington Summit in 1999, when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were formally welcomed as new members and the Alliance was waging a controversial air campaign over Yugoslavia. Observers may detect a sense of irony in the fact that yet again NATO is engaged in an operation, this time in Afghanistan, that is stirring a great deal of debate.

Some allies have been sceptical about the idea of a new Strategic Concept, which in addition to the 1949 Washington Treaty serves as the Alliance's most central document, outlining its purpose and tasks. Given the differing views among the now 28 member states about NATO's role it may indeed become a cumbersome process. On the other hand, NATO should rise to the occasion. With a new US administration (albeit one that is more celebrated by NATO's founding members than its newcomers), the French reintegrated into NATO's military structures and the Alliance engaged in all kinds of previously inconceivable operations and activities, it is a good time to come forward with an updated strategy. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, there is still a need to say what NATO is, how it looks at the world and what it wants to do about it. Apart from the document that will come out as a result, having 28 member states (of which 12 were not involved in the 1999 strategy) discuss a host of relevant topics is in itself a very useful exercise.

New Procedure

This time, the new Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has opted for another procedure. In order to manage the process with 28 member states, he has tasked a Group of Experts to formulate recommendations by April 2010. Subsequently, Rasmussen will incorporate these elements into a report that will be forwarded to the respective capitals for comments. The actual negotiations in Brussels will only start after next year's summer break. This is a sensible approach, since experts are more likely to come up with imaginative ideas than diplomats. However, the composition of this group, chaired by Madeline Albright, is disappointing. At least some of its members, primarily civil servants, seem to have been nominated to protect national interests rather than anything else. The former CEO of Royal Dutch Shell, Jeroen van der Veer, who is vice-chairman of the group, counts as the only 'out of the box' member, although his nomination may convey the wrong message that energy security should be a priority for NATO. Also, none of the group's members have specific expertise in EU security matters, while the NATO-EU relationship will be an important issue. Finally, a military adviser might have been added to the group to ensure that ideas emanating from the experts are within the realm of feasibility. This omission has already prompted NATO's Military Committee to lay out its own priorities for a new Strategy, which may fuddle the process from the very beginning

Be clear and concise

Today's NATO, although more active than ever before, is not the self-evident organisation it used to be. In a drastically changing international environment the Alliance has to sell itself, to its own domestic audiences and to the outside world. Over the last decade public diplomacy has only become more important. Therefore, the new Concept

must be a far shorter document than its predecessor, whose 65 paragraphs, littered with repetition and duplication, never won many hearts and minds. If one states something once and clearly, instead of paraphrasing one's core principles and tasks over and over again, one is likely to have a stronger impact. Furthermore, it is recommended that chapters of a more technical nature, containing guidelines for the military or internal reform processes (NATO's protracted "Transformation" that started with the 2002 Prague Summit), are relegated to annexes, whose expiry dates do not necessarily have to match the validity of the overall strategy.

Let us have a look at some of the issues that will be discussed when writing a new Strategic Concept.

Don't touch consensus

With its current membership, should NATO's decision-making process, or rather manageability, be part of a new strategy? Although internal procedures should preferably be left out of the core document, this topic merits debate. How agile or effective is a consensus-based organisation with 28 members? Proposals about some kind of enhanced cooperation are being floated, saying only that those countries who are operationally involved can take part in decision making which is relevant to that particular operation. At the end of the day, it does not seem wise to elaborate such ideas. The advantage of having the entire Alliance at least politically on board outweighs the occasional risk of one or a few countries keeping NATO from doing things. If needed, enough internal pressure can be exerted to maintain NATO cohesion. And once one starts to institutionalise differentiation, this will affect NATO's fundamental principle of the indivisibility of security and may spell the beginning of the end for the Alliance. Besides, informally there are plenty of get-togethers, e.g. by member states involved in ISAF Regional Command South. Practices like these should be continued, but not codified.

Collective security is the name of the game

Allies hold different views over the question whether NATO is primarily a collective self-defence organisation or a collective security organisation. It is obvious that the article 5 guarantee clause of the Washington Treaty is the foundation on which the Alliance is built, but it is equally obvious that preparing for article 5 situations is not NATO's main daily business, despite the fact that only recently this article has been invoked for the very first time (albeit rather as a symbolical gesture: contrary to a widely held popular belief, NATO's operation in Afghanistan is not an article 5 operation; rather NATO is leading a multinational assistance force that is mandated by the UN Security Council). NATO documents are ambiguous about this: the 2006 Comprehensive Political Guidance, an in-between document for military planners, states that "collective defence will remain the core purpose of the Alliance", whereas the Declaration on Alliance Security that was adopted in Strasbourg/Kehl considers collective defence to be the "cornerstone" of the Alliance. The new Strategic Concept should do away with this ambiguity and make clear that collective security, based on a commitment to defend each other, is the name of the game.

Single message to Russia

Much of this debate, of course, has to do with the perception of Russia, arguably the biggest fault line within the Alliance. With regard to Russia it must be 'either/or': one cannot seriously plead for a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia, as Rasmussen did in his first public speech as Secretary General, and at the same time pursue membership of Georgia and Ukraine, since these two policy goals are mutually exclusive. Although the Bucharest Summit of April 2008 may have agreed that "these countries will become members of NATO" (in various respects an ill-formulated compromise, if only because the NATO Council cannot prejudge the outcomes of the announced referendum on membership in Ukraine, or allied parliamentary ratification procedures for that matter), there are many good reasons not to make haste with implementing this decision. Article 10 of the Washington Treaty states that any enlargement must contribute to the security of the North Atlantic Area, and with regard to Georgia and Ukraine this will, at least for the foreseeable future, not be the case. This is not about granting decision-making powers to Moscow, let alone condoning Russian behaviour, but about preserving the Alliance.

Secondly, the NATO-Russia Council must develop into a genuine security forum where no topics for debate will be off-limits. If the proposals by President Medvedev for a new European security architecture, however immature at this stage, show anything, it is the urgently felt need by the Russians to have a seat at security tables that matter. The

NATO-Russia Council should become one such table. On enlargement: NATO must advocate its Open Door policy, but unless it deliberately wants to annoy Russia it should stop sending out subliminal messages. For instance, the statement in the abovementioned 2009 Declaration on Alliance Security that "enlargement has been an historic success in bringing us closer to our vision of a Europe whole and free" will only have fuelled encirclement theories within the Kremlin's walls and will have raised doubts about NATO's sincerity when it talks about partnership.

Take nuclear debate into account

Another issue that, at least according to some allies, has a Russian dimension to it is NATO's nuclear policy. President Obama's announcement in Prague last April that he wants to reduce the role of nuclear weapons with the long-term goal of abolishment, has sparked debate about the question whether the presence of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe still provides an essential political and military link between both sides of the Atlantic. NATO's new strategy will most likely not revise the current nuclear forces posture, but the new impetus to the arms control and non-proliferation debate, and NATO's role in this respect, will have to be translated into the Strategic Concept.

Streamline partnerships

In the context of drafting a new strategy, NATO may want to take a closer look at the patchwork of other partnerships it has developed over the years, ranging from the privileged ones with Ukraine and Georgia to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and relations with individual countries like Australia and Japan. There is no clear policy on partnerships and nobody is really able to tell what merit there is in maintaining the EAPC, where countries like Sweden and Switzerland sit next to Uzbekistan and Belarus. Sometimes NATO's search for partnerships even backfires, as became apparent when the Gulf countries within the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative started asking for nuclear guarantees against neighbouring Iran: something that was explicitly not on offer. Partnerships must follow NATO's strategy, not the other way round.

Improve NATO-EU and NATO-UN; talk to others

As far as inter-organisational relationships are concerned, one deserves special attention: NATO-EU. With 21 overlapping memberships, it is near to impossible to explain why the organisations hardly cooperate. Of course, NATO's Strategic Concept is not going to solve the political stalemate around Turkey-Cyprus, but if the international community is serious about its 'comprehensive approach' to crisis management, it is especially these two organisations that need to act together. To attain this goal, it is imperative that NATO and the EU do not engage in mutual competition, with NATO developing civilian capabilities and the EU aspiring to a strategic military role. With resources only getting scarcer, this would be utterly foolish. Countries with memberships of both organisations must start making choices and stop betting on two horses in the same race.

However, the NATO-UN relationship also has to improve. Again, it is difficult to explain why NATO only recently managed to establish a genuine liaison office in New York, although practically all its operations are UN mandated. And a very thin joint declaration by both Secretaries-General in September 2008 is apparently still so controversial that it is not found on the NATO or UN website. NATO's three permanent Security Council members will have to work harder to address this issue.

Over the last decade, the emergence of more geo-strategic centres of gravity has continued, and the North Atlantic area has become less exclusive than it used to be. This calls for a more generous attitude by NATO, to be reflected in its new strategy, to other regional organisations with a security dimension, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In a sense, NATO should become more part of the system than trying to mould the system after its own image. Rightfully, NATO is and must remain a value-based community, but just engaging the outer world on the basis of common (meaning Western) beliefs, which are more often than not absent, would limit its potential and effectiveness.

Some modesty and realism

As stated above, NATO's new Strategic Concept must be imaginative but will not be revolutionary. Much of what is written in the current document still holds true. NATO may be labelled the most successful military alliance in history, and with the US at its helm it indeed still carries considerable political and military weight, but an organisation that has great difficulty in coughing up a few transport

helicopters for Afghanistan should display some modesty as well. Talking about Afghanistan, the strategy debate should not be overshadowed by this operation, currently NATO's key priority, since with the strategic confusion surrounding it, it is not a given that many more ISAFs will follow. In describing its strategic environment, an important part of any strategy, NATO should be guided by a sense of realism. It probably will not be possible to avoid mentioning climate change and demographic trends, but it is to be hoped that those features are highlighted where vital interests of the Alliance are at stake, and where there is political will and capacity to act.

Finally, the global security environment is highly complex but it is not all historically unprecedented gloom and disaster. Let us not forget that the North Atlantic Area is still prosperous, secure and free. If the 28 member states can come forward with a clear, realistic and user-friendly strategy explaining its principles and expressing its preparedness to act together, this will provide a good basis for NATO to remain a key player in the 21st century security arena.

About Clingendael

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael is a training and research organization concerned with international affairs. The Clingendael Security and Conflict Programme (CSCP) looks into contemporary conflicts, security threats and issues of international justice.

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