“NATO Is Not Dead”

Rob de Wijk

“NATO is not dead, but mission in action”, ran one of the headlines after the Prague Summit. This was a fairly accurate description of the Alliance’s present state. “Action” referred to President Bush’s desire for a global NATO, one that is willing to support the United States in the war on terrorism. But most European leaders are reluctant to transform the Alliance into an American foreign policy instrument. Indeed, the key issue at stake is which role NATO could play in a new world order, i.e. a unipolar order with the United States as the hegemon that sets the rules of the game. Although some important decisions were taken, this critical question was not answered in Prague.

Geopolitical Changes

It is only logical that the geopolitical changes of the 1990s have important implications for transatlantic relations and consequently for NATO. After the Second World War, European Allies had got used to American engagement. Both parties shared the common interest of defending themselves against the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, however, America’s interests were more likely to be at stake in the Far East (the Koreas and Taiwan), Central Asia (the oil-rich Caspian Sea region), the oil-rich Persian Gulf Region (Iraq and Iran), the Middle East (Israel and Palestine) and Central and South America (the war on drugs in Colombia). It is only logical that during the 1990s the United States refocused its attention on these regions.

This new geostrategic reality has profound consequences. During the 1990s collective defense of the Alliance became unimaginable, so it could transform itself into an organization that found its raison d’être in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. In addition, as Europe is no longer America’s number one security priority, the transatlantic security relationship will change. Europe is a safe place and the EU is economically an equal partner for the United States. Consequently, the Europeans are expected to take care of the defense of their interests, especially in their own backyard, by means of their Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and their European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). On a case-by-case basis, Europeans could support the Americans if their common interests are being threatened. But Europe can only support and influence America if it is politically a more powerful player. This requires political power backed up by economic and military might. This requires a change for the Europeans from security consumer to security provider, a transformation for which Europe at present is mentally, organizationally and militarily not yet equipped.

9/11 and Transatlantic Relations

Due to the events of 9/11, America’s main focus has become international terrorism and the “Axis of Evil,” especially Iraq. This new preoccupation will also have important implications for NATO, requiring further transformation or facing irrelevance. The events of 9/11 shifted focus on collective defense once again. NATO invoked Article 5, but this did not result in concerted action of all member states. The Bush administration was not interested in using NATO. US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued that it is the mission that defines the coalition. In his view, the war on terrorism did not require NATO involvement.

One of the underlying causes for current transatlantic differences of opinion revolves around the question of how security could be provided. European governments do not underestimate the threats of wars, terrorism, and rogue states; they simply try to manage complex security
situations. The problem of terror is managed through a combination of practical measures and political means. For example, Irish separatism was dealt with by the British armed forces by fighting militant IRA members and by political dialogue with Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA. European security management aimed at preventing wars has traditionally been done through engagement, i.e. multilateralism and treaties.

Robert Kagan has argued that the Europeans believe that a peaceful world is one that is governed by law, norms, and international agreements. In this world, power politics have become obsolete. Americans, by contrast, believe power politics are needed to deal with Iraq, al-Qaeda and other malign forces. Kagan argues that the Europeans do not understand that their safety is ultimately guaranteed by American military power. To oversimplify it, Europeans like international law and norms because they are weaker than the United States; the latter likes unilateralism because it is the only remaining superpower.

Consequently, European governments seek relative security, whereas Americans seek absolute security. Generally speaking, Europeans try to manage the risks and minimize the problems, whereas Americans seek military victory. Europeans put more emphasis on intent; the United States stresses capability. Europe overemphasizes economics, while the United States overemphasizes political and military issues. As a result, Europeans and Americans differ fundamentally on the methods needed to deal with contemporary security threats. Europeans put emphasis on "soft security," i.e. diplomacy, incentives such as economic aid and peace support operations; Americans emphasize “hard security”, i.e. limited wars of intervention to defend interests and promote regional security. Of course, the Americans became involved in diplomatic efforts and peace support operations, like those in the Balkans, but in most cases their European Allies asked them. Similarly, the United States decided to coerce Iraq through the UN Security Council on the request of its European Allies.

**America and Europe: Worlds Apart?**

Emphasis on multilateralism and loss of sovereignty go hand in hand. As a result of European integration, Europeans have been steadily giving up powers to Brussels. Americans do not see any source of democratic legitimacy higher than the constitutional nation-state. This also explains why the United States and the Europeans have fundamentally different views on the role and value of international institutions. For Europeans, institutions create order and bring stability. Indeed, the pacifying effect of international organizations such as (the forerunners of) the European Union effectively reduced great power rivalry in Europe, while NATO played an important role in preventing war between Greece and Turkey. Moreover, Europeans need these institutions to exercise influence in world affairs. Although the United Kingdom, France and Germany are still great powers, they individually lack the strength to enforce their will on other powerful actors in international relations.

On the other hand Americans have an instrumentalist view of institutions. During the Cold War the UN and the OSCE were *inter alia* seen as instruments for “Russia management.” After the end of the Cold War, NATO became an instrument for “Russia management” as well. Moreover, through NATO, the United States tried to engage former Soviet satellites. For the United States, peacekeeping in the Balkans was of secondary importance.

After 9/11 the relevance of NATO was measured against its role in the war on terrorism and Iraq. Actually, gaining support from the Allies was probably the main objective of the Prague Summit. Other decisions, such as the NATO Response Force (NRF), the Prague Capabilities Commitments (PCC) and the revision of the command structure were seen in the context of new expeditionary capabilities needed for the war on terrorism.
America’s power explains its behavior. As a hegemon, the United States sets the rules of the game. For America hegemonic power provides security and stability, especially if its power remains unchallenged. It is therefore no surprise that in its new National Security Strategy, the Bush administration states that its strategy will no longer rely on deterrence and containment. Instead, the new foundations will be pre-emption and defensive interventions. For the US leadership, Iraq’s policies produced an incentive for preventive action. From a historical perspective, America’s behavior is perfectly understandable. During the Golden Age the Netherlands did not behave very differently, neither did the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century when it “ruled the waves.” In other words, this kind of behavior in international relations is typical of superpowers.

Options for NATO

Where does this leave NATO? Certainly, it will not die. The Alliance will remain a forum for transatlantic consultation on defense and security issues and an instrument to harmonize national defense planning with the aim of enhancing interoperability. For the foreseeable future NATO will also carry out peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and will provide planning support for operations elsewhere. Its future relevance, however, will depend mainly on the role that it will play in the emerging new world order, especially if peacekeeping in the Balkans comes to an end. There are two options. First, the Alliance could become part of a cooperative security system, with NATO as the armed arm of the OSCE or even a merger of the two. This would require further enlargement of NATO, especially with Russia and Ukraine. This option fits into the view of institutions as providers of stability and peaceful relations among states. It takes the pacifying function of institutions as a starting point. Support for this option can be found in the decision of the Prague Summit to enlarge the Alliance with seven OSCE countries. But other developments also support this option, such as the renewed cooperation with the Russians in the NATO-Russia Council and the successful cooperation with other OSCE countries in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. However, a new cooperative security system requires the United States to use its hegemonic power to create new – and to strengthen existing – institutions to engage most countries in the northern hemisphere.

The second option requires a redefinition of Article 5. It will require cooperative efforts of all member states to defend NATO territory against relatively small-scale attacks from terrorist and rogue states. Invocation of Article 5 will no longer demand concerted action of all member states. A small group of the willing and able could make use of NATO planning and command facilities, collective assets and the NRF to carry out expeditionary operations around the globe. In addition, it requires NATO to put more emphasis on homeland defense. Finally, it requires those member states not taking part in the operation to support passively the willing and able. The invocation of Article 5 will demonstrate solidarity among the Allies, while at the same time giving the green light for a coalition of the willing and able. This option clearly fits the American perspective. Support for this option can also be found in the Prague Summit declaration. According to this declaration NATO will transform to “deter, disrupt and protect against any attack on us.” Therefore a new NRF will be established, “ready to move quickly to wherever it is needed.” Also the new, more deployable command structure, including a strategic command responsible for the transformation of military capabilities and for the promotion of interoperability, and the so-called Prague Capabilities Commitments as part of the efforts to improve and develop new capabilities, must be seen in this context. Finally, the Prague Summit decided to implement fully the Civil Emergency Planning and endorsed the military concept for defense against terrorism.

A combination of the two options would give NATO the opportunity to play a key role in the new world order. It requires the Europeans to develop a blue print. But it requires American leadership to merge the two options. The end result would be a regional and a global NATO at the same time. The regional NATO would be part of a larger cooperative security system,
covering most of the northern hemisphere. The global NATO would be based on a redefined Article 5 to allow *ad hoc* coalitions of the willing and able to deal with unforeseen, small-scale contingencies outside the cooperative security system. This is less far fetched than it seems, because the foundation was laid in Prague.

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