NATO's New Mission and the NATO Response Force

Alexander Moens

There is an old saying, “Do not meet troubles half way”. Such is NATO’s challenge today in facing its new strategic threat. The threat is terrorist fervour, hostile dictatorships and proliferating weapons of mass destruction (WMD) hijacking political development efforts in the Middle East. To understand the importance of the need for a new NATO with new missions and a new agenda, we must compare NATO’s role today with its beginning.

In 1947 Harry Truman said: “At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life […] One way of life is based upon the will of the majority […]. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression […].”¹ The Truman administration was faced with the decision whether to approach the combination of communist doctrine and Soviet state power as a threat that needed a comprehensive (countervalue) or a limited-scope (counterpoint) containment strategy.² The critical moment of choice came in 1950. As a result of an Asian crisis (North Korea’s invasion of the South), Truman sent American troops to Europe. A comprehensive rather than counterpoint policy gained the upper hand and was subsequently encoded in NSC-68. Communist power had to be contained everywhere, always.

**Bush’s countervalue strategy**

September 11, 2001 returned NATO to a similar fork in the road. Vital American security interests (and also vital European interests) leapfrogged regional stability and peace reconstruction projects undertaken by NATO in the 1990s to the top of the agenda. In late 2001, the Bush administration formulated a countervalue strategy in the so-called war on terror. First, it declared “war”, freeing up means and ends. It declared war on sponsors and facilitators of terror ending the conventional policy of treating terrorists as faceless and stateless. It opened three fronts in this war. A new Department of Homeland Security and a new preemptive domestic jurisdiction in the form of the Patriot Act are the first front. An international network of intelligence, financial, and covert operations is the second front. Finally, a military and offensive plan constitutes the third front. The administration combined its threat assessments of pre 9/11 (hostile rogues and WMD) with its post 9/11 terrorist threat into a “nexus threat assessment.” The inference of a likely symbiosis among the three threats created a countervalue atmosphere in which the “respond-to-threat” bar was lowered and Iraqi regime change became a policy choice as early as February 2002.

The administration placed its threat analysis inside an overall strategy which rejects the status quo of political instability in the Middle East and rejects the doomsday vision of a clash of civilizations. Instead, it sees militant and terror-based Islamism as an “armed doctrine”, which acts like an heir to fascism and communism in that it seeks to cower the West in order to control a key region, in this case the Middle East.

Given that the terror strikes of this armed doctrine are neither containable nor deterrable, President Bush’s countervalue approach deliberately chose an offensive option. As Secretary of State Colin Powell put it recently: “A strategy limited to dealing with immediate threats would in the end fail to defeat them – just as bailing water out of a boat would not fix a leak.”³ The offensive option also sought to signal dissuasion or deterrence of the will. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice put it this way: “Supporting terror is not a viable strategy in the long term.”⁴ The military offensive option was not the only new measure as the administration added the Proliferation Security Initiative to detect and interdict WMD material.
between rogue states, and most recently the Greater Middle East Initiative as a soft-power tool to foster peaceful economic and political change in the Middle East.

**NATO Shaken Up**

The initial impact of all of these events on NATO – combined with the Bush administration’s low priority for NATO in its first year – has looked negative. Many analysts have concluded that NATO has been sidelined and divided internally. But this judgment is premature. Instead, the dramatic changes have shaken up NATO’s sleepy status quo and are creating the conditions for a new unified purpose and common action plan. First, the new terror threat caused President Bush and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to call for a quicker transformation process in NATO and a focused force for dealing with preventing and responding to terror threats. The Prague Capabilities Initiative, the new Allied Command Transformation and the NATO Response Force Command are three new projects pointing in the same strategic direction.

By mid-2003, the costs in human life, military, economic and political resources in Iraq produced the first major “correction” to US policy on terror and the Nexus strategy. As a result, the Bush administration is moving from preventive military tactics to coercive diplomacy. The approach towards Iran, Syria and Libya thus far illustrate the point. We can see the United States moving from what Henry Kissinger termed a “revolutionary great power”-phase into “system stabilization/consolidation”-phase. To return once more to the Cold War analogy, American presidents eventually determined that communism was not monolithic and that different communist states could be played off against each other. After the high costs of Vietnam, the US backed away from a “pure” counter value policy and proceeded with a mixture of diplomacy and strength.

Whether under Bush II or John Kerry, American strategy in the war on terror will likely favour coercive diplomacy, allowing Europe’s security strategy to move towards the American definition of the new security paradigm. The recent European Strategy document identified terrorism, WMD and failed states as the three top threats. Also, it called for “effective multilateralism”, thus moving towards the American idea of results-based international cooperation.

In sum, as America’s military strength has been checked and Europe is beginning to see the threat to its own national security along America’s lines, a significant window of opportunity is opening for strategic convergence. It is exactly at this juncture that NATO’s importance is rediscovered. The next step is for NATO member states to realize how the common threat must revitalize NATO’s core military capacity.

**Canada and the NRF**

The challenge to Canada and many NATO members is that their defence policy is almost entirely pre-9/11. Given that the new threat requires beside national security and international cooperation on intelligence and covert action also an offensive military option, Canada’s defence policy is hanging like a limb paw on the beaver. How many NATO members have brought their defence policy into the new strategic environment? How many can act in the offensive war against terror? Canada and others find themselves “trapped” by commitments to peace stabilization and reconstruction under declining budgets. Some European members of NATO are spending most of their money on stationary defence and the remaining on peacekeeping and reconstruction tasks. How many are ready doctrinally or financially to prepare for military options confronting the Alliance after 9/11?

When a common threat perception, shared strategy, and mutual resource commitments emerge, the allies still need a means to act together. Whether to respond to a WMD attack,
to dissuade a rogue actor, to strike a terrorist base, or to enforce stability in a post-war zone, the NATO Response Force (NRF) is that vehicle. It appears that the United States has determined to coach transformational change and lend a helping hand to its allies to have both a NATO offensive option in the war on terror and to have NATO come faster into the military transformation process. Rather than focus on the quantity of troops and equipment, the NRF focus is on quality and speed. Canadian officers working with the NRF or at Allied Command Transformation are energized as they see a new creativity in NATO’s military planning and force planning process.

There will however be a strong temptation by some allies to commit some resources on paper and to let the moment pass. Currently, Canada strongly supports the NRF and wants to “contribute forces from all three elements of the Canadian forces,” but also admits that “current commitments preclude providing troops at this time.” At the same time, some inside the American military remain sceptical that allied forces will step up to the plate. Yes, Europe must step up to the plate, but if it does, the US contribution to the NRF must also increase. The NRF will work best if the input between the United States and other allies is about half and half. The success of the NRF depends on creative specialization of labour. Such division can occur within NATO but should not be between NATO and the emerging EU defence policy. Therefore, the NRF underscores a lesson learned since ESDI entered our language: military planning and command across the Atlantic must remain integrated.

The NRF not only offers the most cost-effective solution to dealing with national security threats in faraway places, but also a strong forum for genuine influence on American decision making. Another benefit of NATO “hard power” is that it helps the United States to exercise soft power as proposed in the Greater Middle East Initiative. A strong NATO role may help bridge the EU’s Barcelona process, NATO’s own Mediterranean Dialogue and the new US plan for the Middle East, bringing together three initiatives that address the long-term strategic threat facing all Allies.

Dr. Alexander Moens is an Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, Canada.

Notes

2. The terms “countervalue” and “counterpoint” are loosely related to John Lewis Gaddis’ comparison between George F. Kennan’s containment strategy based on “selected strongpoints” versus Paul Nitze’s emphasis on “perimeter defence”. See John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 91.
5. Author communication with officials in Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs, May 2004.