A unique network

NATO’s energy security agenda

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In the winter of 2006 a dispute between Russia and Ukraine over the price of gas left several countries in Central and Eastern Europe without energy supplies, causing massive economic damage. The crisis raised questions about the impact of energy risks on national security and, more generally, on national sovereignty. For the affected countries, many of whom had joined NATO only two years earlier, there was, however, yet another important question to be answered: should the Atlantic alliances’ mission of safeguarding the security of its member states also include the energy dimension?

Of course, NATO had been dealing with the security of energy supplies long before the gas crisis in 2006. During the Cold War NATO built an elaborate pipeline network in Western Europe to ensure the fuel supply to allied forces. However, even though the 1999 Strategic Concept recognised that the disruption of the flow of vital resources could affect alliance security interests, NATO did not have a dedicated mandate to work in the field of energy security. Consequently, allies struggled to define NATO’s role in an area which was largely non-military in nature, featured many institutional players, and, above all, remained mostly a national responsibility.

Accordingly, when the key principles and areas of NATO’s energy security activities were laid down at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, special attention was paid to avoiding these pitfalls. The result was a modest remit: the allies were to continue their practice of sharing intelligence on energy-related developments, consult politically, engage in cooperation with interested partner countries, and use NATO as a forum for exchanging best practices on the protection of critical energy infrastructure. In a nutshell, while the Bucharest Summit formally provided NATO with a dedicated mandate to work on energy security, it did so in a way a difficult relative is assigned a place at the dinner table: rather far down.

From philosophy to implementation

Today, energy security at NATO has entered a less hesitant phase. Three factors account for this. First, NATO’s new Strategic Concept, released at the 2010 Summit in Lisbon, explicitly highlighted the importance of energy security, citing Europe’s growing dependence on energy imports, and the vulnerability of ever longer supply lines. Moreover, the Concept put energy security, together with other emerging challenges, under the chapter of “Defence and Deterrence”, implying that alliance solidarity would also extend to the energy domain. In a similar vein, the Lisbon Summit Declaration tasked allies to integrate energy security considerations into NATO’s policies and activities.

The second factor was the creation of NATO’s Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD), which provided a bureaucratic foothold for non-traditional security challenges such as energy vulnerabilities, cyber, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Such a division mirrored similar structures in Ministries of Defence of many allies. The creation of ESCD not only raised the visibility of these security challenges within NATO, it also created new opportunities for examining the cross-cutting nature of new challenges (e.g. cyber threats against energy infrastruc-
and for using NATO’s Science for Peace and Security Programme to support research with partner countries in those areas. The new Division also featured a strategic analysis unit that would provide NATO’s leadership with papers on geopolitical flashpoints and longer-range forecasts on various security challenges, including those related to energy. Finally, ESCD also provided NATO with a point of contact for other organisations and the private sector on non-traditional challenges.

However, the most important factor of change was the evolution of the global energy landscape. In 2010 the sophisticated computer worm “Stuxnet” damaged Iranian nuclear centrifuges, demonstrating the growing cyber threat to energy infrastructure. In 2011, the success of the anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya was to a large extent a result of their stable fuel supply, in contrast to insufficient supplies for the regime. Over the course of that same year Pakistan repeatedly halted fuel supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan, highlighting the importance of assuring energy supplies to military operations. In early 2012 Iran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, the chokepoint through which one third of the world’s oil supply passes. Terrorist attacks against energy infrastructure, notably in Iraq, Nigeria and Egypt, continued, averaging 350 incidents per year. Piracy remained a threat to tankers carrying oil from the Gulf region through the Indian Ocean, a threat that NATO’s counter-piracy operation Ocean Shield helped to address.

Other threats to energy infrastructure were posed by environmental disasters, such as the 2010 Pakistan floods and the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011. Finally, the “shale gas revolution” in the United States sparked a discussion on the U.S.’ prospective energy independence and its ramifications for Washington’s relations with Europe and the Middle East.

These international developments vindicated the Strategic Concept’s emphasis on energy security and on threats to infrastructure and supply. Equally importantly, they broadened the energy security discussion far beyond the European gas disputes, reinforcing the point that energy was an issue of concern not just for some allies, but for all. Third, they demonstrated that supplying energy for military operations was more than just a logistical challenge. Fourth and finally, they also brought home the close interrelationship of energy security and other emerging challenges, such as cyber threats, terrorism, piracy, and environmental change. Together, these developments helped to move the discussion...
from one of principle to one of substance. Rather than arguing over whether NATO should or should not have a role to play in energy security, the question of “if” has finally been replaced by the question of “how”.

**NATO’s current agenda**

While NATO is not an energy institution per se, it features several unique characteristics that allow it to contribute to ensuring the security of supplies, enhancing the security of critical energy infrastructure, and raising the collective awareness about the security implications of energy issues.

In terms of membership, NATO includes the United States and Canada, two countries that have rather recently emerged as major oil and gas producers. NATO also includes European non-EU countries, such as Norway and Turkey, which are important producers or energy hubs. In terms of procedures, NATO offers a continuum of intelligence-sharing, political consultation, military planning and military action. It also features a large network of relations with partner countries that includes major energy producers and transit countries. At present, this agenda builds upon the following elements:

**Intelligence and strategic awareness.** With over 60 intelligence services from 28 nations, NATO provides a unique forum for discussing threats to energy security. The major focus of these analyses is the security of critical energy infrastructures, particularly in energy producing and transit countries; and the security of transport routes. To further enhance situational awareness, NATO’s in-house analytical capabilities are currently being expanded, allowing for a more forward-looking analysis of how energy, economic, environmental and other factors may impact on NATO’s policies and operations.

**Consultation.** In addition to regular meetings among allies on energy security issues, individual partners can meet with NATO’s 28 allies in the so-called “28+n” format. These meetings provide allies detailed insights about these partners’ energy policies and security perceptions. In turn, partner countries get an opportunity to inform allies about their national energy outlook and their expectations about future cooperation.

**Support to the protection of critical energy infrastructure.** Critical energy infrastructure faces various types of risks, ranging from natural disasters and political instability to terrorist and cyber attacks. As most NATO member states depend on energy imports from regions outside the alliance, they have a vested interest in contributing to the security of energy infrastructure in the producing or transit countries. Accordingly, sharing best practices on the protection of critical energy infrastructure remains NATO’s most frequently offered cooperation item with respect to energy security. Activities in this regard benefit from NATO’s long-standing expertise in crisis and consequence management and from the effective involvement of the private sector. NATO also builds its competence to provide support to the protection of energy infrastructure through its counter-piracy and counter-terrorism operations, as well as incorporating energy-related scenarios in relevant exercises.

**Energy efficiency in the military.** It is widely acknowledged that the growing fuel requirements of allied forces can compromise their operational effectiveness. Since NATO’s missions will involve long distances and a sustained presence, they require ever larger support structures, which also increase the risk for allied soldiers. Several NATO member nations have thus started to examine ways to reduce their dependence on traditional fuels and shrink their logistics footprint. However, these are essentially national initiatives. NATO has started to bring scattered national efforts together, with a view to explore promising technologies (e.g. smart grids in deployable base camps, fuel cells) and agree common standards to enhance allied interoperability. Reducing the logistical effort means reducing fuel costs, reducing the risk for soldiers who protect supplies, and demonstrating environmental awareness.

**Cooperation with partner countries.** Several of NATO’s partner countries have expressed their interest in cooperation in the field of energy security, but their interests differ considerably. For example, whereas some countries are mostly interested in the protection of maritime energy infrastructure and anti-piracy operations, others focus on training and on access to NATO member countries’ expertise in the protection of energy infrastructures. The alliance has well established contacts on energy security with a variety of partner countries from North Africa, the Gulf region, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, including Russia. To respond effectively to the interests of such a wide range of actors, NATO seeks to develop tailored partnership cooperation menus in energy security and, as appropriate, other emerging challenges. NATO’s Science for Peace and Security Programme also plays an important role, as it provides
opportunities for NATO member and partner countries to develop new methodologies and technologies in the field of energy security.

Dialogue with other energy security stakeholders. Several major international organisations, including NATO, the EU and the OSCE, are currently defining their respective roles in energy security. To avoid duplication, NATO maintains an informal dialogue with these and other energy security stakeholders. For example, the International Energy Agency regularly briefs NATO committees on global energy developments, and NATO and the OSCE coordinate their efforts in producing “best practices” guidelines on the protection of critical energy infrastructure.

Training and education. The growing importance of energy considerations in the international political debate suggests that energy security should become a permanent fixture in NATO’s education and training programmes. Diplomats and military leaders alike should be given the opportunity to develop a better understanding of energy and related issues, such as resource competition and climate change, as drivers of future security developments. To this end, an attempt is now being made to set up new (or augment existing) courses at NATO’s training facilities. The new NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Lithuania will play a major role in this regard, in particular as concerns training on enhancing military energy efficiency. In addition, some of NATO’s partner countries may open their national education and training facilities for NATO and other partner nations.

Enhanced public diplomacy efforts. Since all major documents on energy security are classified, NATO’s role in this area is insufficiently understood not only by the public but also by the political elites of partner countries. Given the increasing public interest in NATO’s response to emerging challenges - and the need to prevent any misunderstandings - the alliance is now making a more systematic effort to explain its policies and initiatives to a broader audience. This includes a stronger web presence, articles and conference contributions by NATO staff, and disseminating the findings of NATO’s energy-related events to a much broader group of stakeholders.

Toward a more comprehensive agenda

NATO’s agenda is driven by the collective interests of allies. As an organisation that is based on the consensus of 28 member states, no ally or group of allies can impose its will on others. The agenda will only advance once those allies who are interested in a certain issue have built sufficient support for their ideas, for example by launching concrete initiatives and offering tangible contributions. Ideally, these initiatives are designed in a way to take the other allies along. The fact that many NATO members are hosting events on energy security and even established a dedicated NATO Centre of Excellence is visible proof that energy security has the potential to develop.

However, for the time being, the subject remains at the periphery of NATO’s agenda. For energy security to move closer towards the centre of NATO’s attention, several favourable conditions need to be met:

First, more systematic discussions among allies about the security implications of energy developments. For example, the American shale gas “revolution” may have implications for U.S. internationalism that might also affect America’s role in NATO, notably as a potential gas supplier to Central and Eastern European allies. By the same token, the prospective end of Russia’s quasi-monopoly in the European gas market could lead to reverberations in that country that would affect NATO members in many ways.

Second, a more thorough understanding of the nexus between energy, resources and conflict. Thus far, predictions about “resource wars” have turned out to be too alarmist. However, the tensions in the South China Sea caused by overlapping territorial claims should be a healthy reminder that focusing on energy alone is not enough. Raw materials, notably “rare earths”, also have to be part of the picture, and it is important to analyse the security implications of these developments.

Third, a closer examination of the links between energy security and environmental developments. The implications of these developments, such as climate change, water scarcity and desertification, range from the opening of new sea lanes in the High North to the possible aggravation of regional tensions in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. NATO will not be affected by each and every development in this regard, yet the potential increase in natural disasters may also lead to more humanitarian relief operations, including by NATO.

Fourth, the full integration of energy and resource considerations in NATO’s training, education and exercises. Like cyber attacks or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, developments related to energy, resources and climate change have the potential to severely alter the security environment, both in terms of politics as well as military planning. Training and exercises help to determine the best
responses to the crisis environment (e.g. interrupted energy supplies to operational theatres) and prepare for it.

Fifth, enhanced interaction with the private sector. Like in the case of cyber, the private sector owns most of the infrastructure that NATO’s efforts are meant to help secure. Such an interaction could contribute to a consistent evaluation of risks and threats among the key energy players. It may be difficult to implement, but it is a recurring theme in the dialogue between NATO and industry and will eventually have to be addressed.

Finally, a more holistic security approach. In order to remain a viable consultation, early-warning and force-multiplying mechanism for its member states, NATO could become the forum for a much broader security dialogue, in which the relationship between economic developments, resources and military issues can be thoroughly analysed and discussed. Such a broader security dialogue will remain elusive, however, if nations fear that it may “militarise” predominantly economic issues, or that it will allow other nations to unduly interfere with their national economic or energy policies. By the same token, NATO may also have to broaden its understanding of what constitutes essential

“capabilities” in a globalised world: a network of civilian energy and cyber experts, an effective intelligence-sharing process, and trustful relations with partner countries may well become just as essential as fighter planes and armoured vehicles.

Ultimately, the key to the success of energy security on NATO’s agenda is allied solidarity. As allies have different energy concerns and perceptions, the debate about NATO’s role in this domain will continue. As long as allies remain mindful of each other’s sensitivities, however, they can craft a sensible agenda for NATO that will not only prove beneficial to all member nations, but also to an increasing number of partner countries.

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A burning Iraqi oil well. Terrorist attacks against energy infrastructure is one of the factors in the evolution of the global energy landscape. These international developments vindicated NATO Strategic Concept’s emphasis on energy security and threats to infrastructure and supply (photo: Wikimedia/Ahodges7)