

ALLIANCE OF CONTRADICTIONS: AFTER NATO'S ANNIVERSARY SUMMIT

The NATO anniversary summit in Strasbourg and Kehl may have been overshadowed by controversy over the nomination of the new secretary-general, but the key issue was the realignment of strategy on Afghanistan, the renewal of the transatlantic partnership, and the task of elaborating a new strategic concept. The increasing dominance of the US in the Afghanistan mission will cause a relative decline of the alliance's importance. In order to preserve the essence of the transatlantic security partnership, NATO will have to trim back fundamentally the level of its aspirations.



British Prime Minister Brown, US President Obama, and French President Sarkozy at the NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl, 4 April 2009
REUTERS/Jason Reed

Anniversaries are always a good opportunity for a symbolic review of past achievements, for taking stock of the present situation, and for an outlook on forthcoming tasks. No venue could have better encapsulated the success of NATO over the past 60 years than the German-French border region between Strasbourg and Kehl. The alliance has not only secured the peace externally, based on Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. It has also contributed decisively to the establishment of a transatlantic security community that has once and for all rejected war as a means of political confrontation between its formerly antagonistic members.

The choreography designed by the hosts, German Federal Chancellor Angela Mer-

kel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, focused on past achievements as well as on the commitment of all member states to facing the key challenge of the day, namely the Afghanistan mission, and NATO's collective purpose and strategy. Accordingly, a Declaration on Alliance Security was passed affirming core tasks such as collective defense, the enlargement strategy, and cooperation with partners. On the other hand, the alliance confirmed its intention to make a long-term contribution to stabilizing Afghanistan.

The meeting of the now 28 heads of state and government of the Atlantic Alliance was overshadowed by a minor personnel issue concerning the nomination of the next secretary-general that origi-

nated within Turkey's domestic politics. Even though Turkey gained some concessions with this approach, the overall result was probably a miscalculation, since the goodwill of European states towards Turkey's EU membership bid has been further eroded. The entire matter can furthermore be seen as evidence that the member states, unlike at other times in the history of the alliance, no longer use summits as platforms for seminal decisions and important developments concerning the alliance, but at best as occasions for determining ad-hoc crisis management strategies of limited duration and sustainability.

This is precisely why the decision to charge the secretary-general with elaborating a new strategic concept that does justice to the new security-policy challenges and redefines the purpose of the alliance was of such overriding importance. There are many indications that the struggle for a strategic concept will expose the extant fault lines in the alliance. However, this constellation also offers the opportunity to develop a more realistic and also decisive assessment of the chances and limitations of the Atlantic Alliance.

Déjà vu: From Washington to Strasbourg/Kehl

As the heads of state and government arrived in the French-German border region, many were reminded of the last major

jubilee summit of the alliance, the 50th anniversary in Washington in April 1999. As then, NATO is currently at war – though not on the European periphery in Kosovo, but far away from the Euro-Atlantic alliance area in Afghanistan. On the one hand, this southwest Asian country, which served as the center of planning for the 11 September 2001 attacks, encapsulates the fundamental transformation of the international system and new challenges in security policy. At the same time, however, it indicates a regional complexity that, against the background of divergent strategic cultures, threatens to overwhelm the collective preparedness of the allied states and appears to exceed the competence of the alliance.

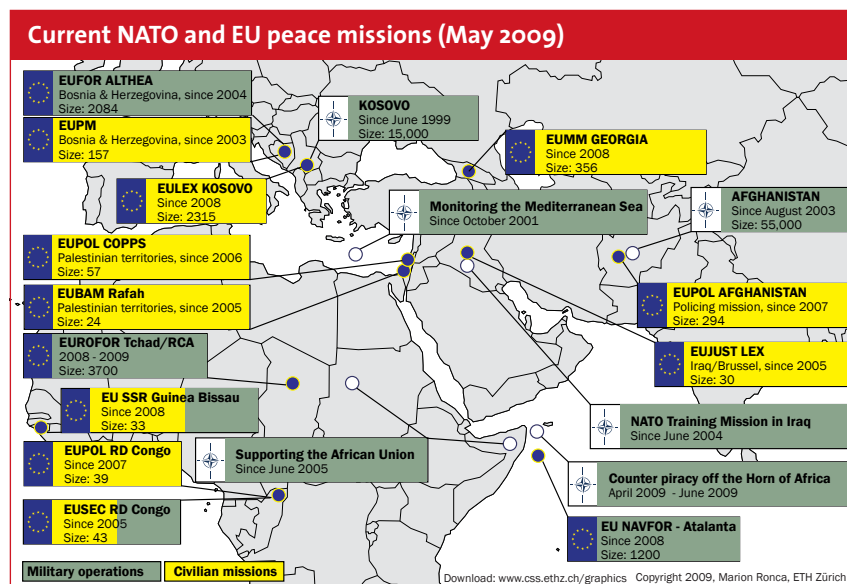
As in 1999, the summit meeting of 2009 is evidence of the alliance's "open door" policy – a decade ago, the first round of eastern enlargement resulted in the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic; this time, the new members were Croatia and Albania. As in 1999, relations with Russia are subject to serious tension – not, however, due to the peace enforcement role that the alliance has taken on in the Hindu Kush much like it did a decade ago in Kosovo, but because of its expansion policy in the post-Soviet space. Finally, as in 1999, the decisive agent of alliance transformation is the US, which – a driven actor and as a driving force – established itself 60 years ago as the Western hegemon.

However, unlike a decade ago, the boundless leadership role of the US is no longer uncontested. The disappearance of the Soviet threat and the associated expansion of the freedom of action on the part of alliance members, as well as the struggle between US dominance and Western European self-assertion, have caused the center of gravity to shift within the alliance.

Europeanization of NATO?

It is against this background that the complete return of France to NATO's military structures should be seen. Paris had never left the alliance, was always represented in the North Atlantic Council as its key decisionmaking body, and had remained committed to collective defense.

During the Cold War, the French celebrated special status within a largely static alliance that, for structural reasons, only permitted the Europeans a limited



range of action may have been justifiable. However, as the alliance established itself as the key security policy institution in the expanded Euro-Atlantic space after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the political and military cost of remaining aloof became increasingly unsustainable. France was in danger of falling behind in matters of military interoperability. Furthermore, Paris was forced to acknowledge that the fourth-largest contributor of funding and troops could only gain real political influence by way of full integration into the alliance.

Thus, President Sarkozy has completed the process of subtle reintegration that his predecessors Mitterrand and Chirac had initiated at the beginning of the 1990s with the stated aim of Europeanization. It is based on the conviction, which has already become accepted wisdom in other European capitals for some time, that transatlantic and European security policy are complementary and not (necessarily) in competition with one another. This very issue had originally been designated as the main topic of debate at the summit. However, it was put on the back-burner due to the change of administration in Washington and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Thus, the potential future shape of a complementary partnership between NATO and the EU in concrete terms remains controversial, not least in view of the occasional overlap of the geographic engagements of the two bodies.

Nevertheless, if the return of France to NATO's military structures (except the Nuclear Planning Group) is to be under-

stood as a proposal to renew the transatlantic partnership, then the new US president has been swift and agile in picking up the ball. President Obama recently stated that the US wanted to be a partner, not a patron of the Europeans, and that a strengthening of Europe would inevitably mean a strengthening of NATO. He thus repeated his determination to inaugurate "a new era of cooperation" as outlined in remarks presented by Vice President Joe Biden at the Munich Security Conference at the beginning of February.

Despite Obama's emphasis on the need for a break with the previous administration's policies, his appeal stating that change in the US position would have to coincide with a modification of the Europeans' stance was in line with the tradition of all post-war US presidents. The decades-old call for a "well-equipped and capable NATO", i.e. for transatlantic burden-sharing, was sounded once more – and died away even before it had finished traveling across the Atlantic.

Competing multilateralisms

Irrespective of national caveats, the partial lack of adjustments to mission doctrine, the heterogeneous distribution of burdens, and the unsatisfactory implementation of the political and military mandate, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had urged the European allies ahead of the summit to enhance their engagement in Afghanistan significantly. While a rejectionist front soon developed in "old Europe" who only begrudgingly offered a commitment to deploy 5,000 additional military personnel, the US

showed its determination to fundamentally rethink its Afghanistan strategy. In addition to the review of objectives, the expansion of the geographic focus to include Pakistan, and the concentration on finding a political solution, the decision was made to deploy an additional 17,000 troops and 4,000 instructors to Afghanistan in a first step.

Two fundamental tendencies can be identified: First of all, the US administration's course of action confirms the propensity for selective multilateralism that has become increasingly noticeable since the end of the Cold War. While multilateralism within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty is not questioned in principle, it no longer takes precedence where it imposes undue

limitations on the independent freedom of action of the US or fails

to generate noticeable added value with respect to legitimacy, European contributions, and European commitments. The new strategy for Afghanistan announced ahead of the NATO summit, as well as the nuclear disarmament initiative that was announced on the periphery of the summit in a gymnasium in Strasbourg and then defined in more detail on the forecourt of Prague Castle ahead of the US-EU summit, emphasize both this tendency towards selective multilateralism and the essentially unwavering US claim to leadership.

Summit documents 2009

- Declaration on Alliance Security [↗](#)
- Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration [↗](#)
- Summit Declaration on Afghanistan [↗](#)

Secondly, and immediately related to this, the decisions made on both sides of the Atlantic inevitably, though not necessarily intentionally, coincide with an Americanization of the Afghan mission, which is likely to be further accelerated by the withdrawal of troops by close allies (Canada and the Netherlands). Irrespective of an increasingly visible asymmetry in the interests of NATO allies in Afghanistan, the real paradox is that just as the newly realigned US strategy is being greeted with almost unanimous approval by the European allies, the influence of the latter on the further course of the mission is diminishing. In the middle term, a gradual downward spiral is likely to develop, be-

ginning with the loss of influence of the European NATO partners and a relative loss of importance of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. This will entail a reduced commitment and declining sense of responsibility, which in turn will serve as a pretext for an essentially domestically motivated troop withdrawal, and in the worst-case scenario lead to a failure of the mission.

Which NATO for the Future?

The latest summit, like the earlier ones in Bucharest (CSS Analysis No. 33 [↗](#)) and Riga, shows that the importance of the NATO mission in Afghanistan extends far beyond the operative level. When outgoing Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer

stated, just before the summit, that he hoped Afghanistan would not come to be seen as "Obama's war", but that all member states would feel bound to their commitments, he may have had in mind the short-term success of alliance-wide troop increases. The real significance of his statement, however, should be seen in the context of the divergence of national strategic cultures that has become increasingly conspicuous in recent years.

The timing of the summit did not admit a fundamental discussion on the future alignment of the alliance. The new US administration only took office at the end of January, and the worst financial crisis since the 1920s has demanded the full attention of the alliance members, which is why the summit had to be squeezed in between the G20 and US-EU summits.

There was, however, a shared consensus among the 28 heads of state and government as to the necessity of elaborating a new strategic concept that will be presented at the next summit in Lisbon in autumn 2010. Even though the usual compromises in terms of wording may be skillfully employed to cover up divergences in opinion, it is already evident today that debates among the allies will be even more intense than those over the future role of NATO that informed the last strategic concept of 1999.

In the context of the mission in Afghanistan and the Georgian conflict of August 2008, the cracks in the foundation of the Atlantic Alliance became patently

obvious. The Anglo-Saxon powers have for years been aiming to globalize NATO both functionally and geographically. On the other hand, their closest allies in Eastern Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe are pushing for NATO to concentrate on collective defense as the core of the alliance, due to an anti-Russian complex that is historically understandable, but nevertheless disproportionate. A third group, led by Germany and France, is mainly in favor of preserving the status quo, i.e., preserving the principles of collective defense; expanding the alliance only if it could be reconciled with Russia's legitimate security concerns; and projecting stability and security in the framework of missions only as long as they are predicated on the political and military capabilities and limitations of the alliance members.

All of the above will result in NATO having to reduce the level of its ambitions. When the interests of all 28 member states are taken into account expectations and capabilities will be better reconciled than is the case today. Irrespective of the enormous challenges in Afghanistan, the alliance is approaching a phase of consolidation and self-reflection, which in addition to the fundamental redefinition of tasks will also bring readjustments in terms of the expansion strategy, relations with Russia, and the question of nuclear strategy. The core of the transatlantic security partnership will remain intact. Nevertheless, in addition to NATO, more flexible configurations of groups of states under the leadership of the US will contribute in their own ways to global security.

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