

Rob de Wijk

## The Challenge: NATO in the Realm of New Geopolitical Realities

Should NATO remain primarily a collective defense alliance or should it be transformed into a worldwide security provider? This question lies at the core of the debate in allied capitals as NATO develops its next Strategic Concept. New security challenges, as well as NATO's military operations in Afghanistan, suggest that the pressure for change has become irresistible.

As NATO considers its future strategic posture, it must take into account three dramatic new security challenges that will impact the interests of its members. First, it must account for the impact of rising poles in the international system. Second, it must prepare for the security impact of the competition among world powers for scarce resources. Third, NATO must consider how climate change will impact international security and Alliance interests. These three principal challenges in this emerging strategic environment require that NATO reconsider its role and mission, in particular the meaning of Articles 4 and 5 of the Washington Treaty, military transformation and partnerships - most importantly the NATO-Russia relationship.

### New Security Challenges

#### Rising Poles in the International System

The 2007 cyber attacks in Estonia, the 2008 South Ossetia War between Russia and Georgia and the 2009 gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine heightened fears that Russia would once again become NATO's principal adversary. This focus on Russia distracts attention from security challenges that will require new and unorthodox responses and from the impact the rise of other geopolitical powers will have on the Alliance. This first challenge is of a geopolitical nature:

#### The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft and former Norwegian Minister of Defense Kristin Krohn Devold, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

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- The geopolitics of power are shifting as U.S. hegemony gives way to a multipolar world in which the United States and Europe compete with China, India and Russia as centers of military, political and economic power. International relations scholars maintain that a multipolar system is less stable than a unipolar or bipolar one. In a multipolar world there is heightened risk of misperceptions, which undermines trust and stability. Moreover, emerging powers will reshape the geopolitical landscape because they are likely to be

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more assertive, casting a larger shadow on their regions and the world.

- Due to the reshaping of geopolitics the West's shaping power will decline. This trend is reinforced by the difficulties encountered in counterinsurgency operations. As the shaping power of the West is weakened, it will be increasingly difficult to protect interests. This will make the West less reluctant to use its armed forces if vital interests are *not* affected.
- A power struggle with new poles could have important repercussions for international security, the efficacy of international law and the functioning of international institutions. New centers of power may see it to their advantage to block western action in multilateral institutions. The difficulties of reaching agreement within the United Nations Security Council on Iran and Sudan are a clear prelude to how this might work.
- Anti-western sentiment is growing in many parts of the world, with both states and non-state actors trying to undermine liberal democratic systems. Many new NATO members see Russia as the real threat and view its increasingly assertive tactics as an attack on their own democratic systems of government. These fears are no longer contained to Central and Eastern Europe. The 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas crisis forced many West Europeans to realize the extent of the continent's worrisome energy dependence on Russia.

## Competition over Scarce Resources

The geopolitical challenge is closely related to the issue of scarcity:

- Industrialized and industrializing nations demand unrestricted access to resources, particularly energy supplies and scarce minerals, as a prerequisite for continued economic growth and socio-political stability. The most pressing issue is perhaps not energy, but minerals. Substitutes are available, but their development may still be some years off. As competition for resources is a zero-sum game, scarcity is becoming a major source of geopolitical strife, putting the stability of the entire system at risk. Scarce resources are now the key driver for China's foreign policy and increasingly so for the United States and Europe, although many Europeans still consider raw materials in terms of trade politics instead of power politics.

- Scarce resources will threaten NATO's interests in a number of ways. In resource-rich countries resource nationalism and nationalistic appeals could, if they have gripped the populace, lead to emotional and irrational confrontational policies. Venezuela's resource nationalism could foreshadow a shifting energy landscape and its impact on the interests of NATO member states. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has long threatened America with an oil boycott, but up until recently he had no other logical choice but to provide the United States with its heavy sour oil because only American refineries can refine it. But Chavez may be able to strike a future deal with China now that Beijing has decided to build similar power plants.
- For the sake of domestic stability resource-poor countries have no other choice but to defend their economic interests. China is already pursuing increasingly assertive policies in an attempt to gain access to raw materials in Africa, and now in South America as well. Countries could try to acquire bases in resource-rich countries and could transfer arms to resource-rich or transit countries. In Pakistan, China is building a naval base and a listening post in Gwadar, and a deep-water port in Pasni. On the southern Coast of Sri Lanka, China is building a fuelling station and facilities are being built in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well. Finally, China is one of the biggest arms suppliers to resource-rich African states such as Sudan and Zimbabwe. This development could turn the Indian Ocean into the flashpoint of future geopolitical strife.
- Resource-rich countries and major consumers such as China could form blocks to advance geopolitical interests. The formation of new blocks will increase the negative effects of multipolarity. In *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*, Michael T. Klare warned of the destabilizing effects of proto-blocks led by the United States and Japan, and Russia and China. As an example, in November 2008, Russian warships sailed into a Venezuelan port in the first deployment of its kind in the Caribbean since the end of the Cold War. Miscalculations become more likely when gunboat diplomacy is used in boundary disputes over resources, such as in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the North Pole region.
- Resource-poor western democracies may have to deal with stronger resource-rich autocracies with a state

capitalist economic system. As China's wealth grows, Beijing's soft power could even replace America's soft power.

- The vulnerability of pipelines and the stability of providers of energy and minerals remain a serious challenge as well. The world's largest oil reserves, together with trans-national pipelines and major shipping routes, all lie within a 'zone of instability' that encircles the globe. This zone of instability faces numerous challenges, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, as well as a growing risk of terrorism, organized crime and piracy. Instability is compounded in some parts by the destabilizing effect of youth bulges, competition for scarce drinking water and localised conflicts for regional domination.

## Threats Posed by the Impact of Climate Change

Climate change, the third new challenge, is a threat catalyst:

- The conflict in Darfur is seen by some experts as the first climate war. Climate change could lead to migration, undermining social and consequently political stability of industrialized liberal democracies. War games and intelligence studies concluded that over the next 20 to 30 years, vulnerable regions - particularly sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia - will face the prospect of food shortages, water crises and catastrophic flooding that could demand humanitarian relief or a military response.
- Climate change could also lead to new resource conflicts. It is estimated that the Arctic region contains 13% of the world's unproven oil reserves and 30% of the world's unproven gas reserves. Melting ice caps makes these reserves more accessible.

## The Challenge for NATO

Geopolitical change, resource conflicts and the security consequences of climate change compel NATO to rethink its role in the world and the future of transatlantic cooperation. **As not all member states share the same threat perception, the biggest challenge for the Alliance leaders charged with drafting and negotiating the Strategic Concept is to deal with divergent threat**

**perceptions and different opinions about NATO's role and mission.** Different threat perceptions, together with the lack of political will to deploy sufficient troops, for instance in Afghanistan, and investments in expeditionary capabilities weakened the core principles of Alliance solidarity. Consequently, NATO's new Strategic Concept should:

- **Bridge the gap between the different threat perceptions within NATO.** It is not acceptable that some countries deploy forces in the risky areas of Afghanistan because they believe that their vital interests are at stake, while others reluctantly deploy and only to less risky areas or with limited numbers in the hope to minimally satisfy allied expectations. Thus, a two-tier Alliance is emerging with one part focusing on collective defense and another part on cooperative security. The new Strategic Concept must bridge these two visions, for they are not unrelated.
- **Make clear that NATO as a collective defense organization is weakened if the Alliance fails as a cooperative security organization.** A credible contribution to risky "away" operations is a prerequisite for NATO's survival as a credible defense organization. The Strategic Concept should also explain how expeditionary capabilities can be used for classic Article 5 operations as well. From a military operational perspective the deployment of Dutch troops for the defense of the Baltic States is an expeditionary operation. The same holds true for the Baltic States deploying troops to defend Turkey.
- **Make the defense of common interests - one of which is territorial defense - the centerpiece of the new strategy.** Consequently, the Strategic Concept should provide a new understanding of Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Article 4 states that, "The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened." The Strategic Concept should spell out the *consequences* of such a consultation. This should be done in two ways:
  - **Turn NATO into an enabler of coalitions of the willing and able.** In case the vital interests of one or more member states are affected, a NATO coalition of the willing and able could be tasked to deal with the crisis. This coalition should be able to use

collective NATO assets and elements of NATO's command structure and should not be hindered by the views of non-participating member states.

- **Borrow ideas from the European Union (EU) that could make NATO more effective.** *Constructive abstention* is the idea of allowing an EU Member State to abstain on a vote in the European Council under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), without blocking a unanimous decision. In addition, the EU Lisbon Treaty features *Permanent Structured Cooperation*, for “those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another.” Member States willing to take part commit to common levels of defense investments; to “bring their defence apparatus into line with each other as far as possible.” Creating core groups with a shared mindset and military capabilities that fulfil higher military criteria is the way forward for NATO.
- The desire to join such a core group is a much stronger incentive to restructure one's armed forces than continuous pledges by the NATO Secretary General or the U.S. President. As a matter of fact, such a core group already exists unofficially and is plain to see in the south of Afghanistan. Moreover, the NATO Special Operations Forces Transformation Initiative (NSTI) approximates the idea of a core group as well.
- **The Strategic Concept should provide new defense planning guidance based on the shift from classical territorial defense to the defense of interests.** The latter requires expeditionary combat operations and sustained complex stabilization missions. The document should emphasize that there is no contradiction between capabilities needed for collective defense and expeditionary means for cooperative security. Therefore, it should emphasize deployable combat power for short, high-intensity “away” operations and further investments in quickly deployable power projection capabilities, including strategic lift and

command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR).

- **For political reasons, Article 5 should not be questioned, nor should it be broadened.** In 2006, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar called on the Alliance to come to the aid of any member whose energy sources are threatened by using the organization's Article 5 mutual defence clause. Some suggest that Article 5 must be invoked in case of a cyber attack. But NATO cannot possibly deal with challenges that will not require a military response. A cyber attack, for example, requires economic sanctions, which should be imposed by the EU and United States collectively.

## Conclusion

Together, new global concerns have huge implications for western security and will require NATO leaders to redefine the Alliance's underlying political and defense objectives, its geographic reach and the military mechanisms they are prepared to employ. The shift in emphasis from protecting territory to defending strategic interests requires NATO to transform the armed forces of all member states into deployable armed forces, remove obstacles for risky “away” operations and forge a new understanding of Alliance solidarity.

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## STRATCON 2010

The Strategic Advisors Group's STRATCON 2010 project seeks to shape and inform the transatlantic debate over NATO's new Strategic Concept. STRATCON 2010 will issue publications to define the critical issues NATO must confront in drafting a new Strategic Concept. For more information about the SAG or STRATCON 2010, please contact Vice President and Director of the Program on International Security Damon Wilson at [dwilson@acus.org](mailto:dwilson@acus.org) or Program Associate Director Jeff Lightfoot at [jlightfoot@acus.org](mailto:jlightfoot@acus.org).

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