

SDA Report

# Protecting the global commons

September 16, 2010  
Dolce La Hulpe, Brussels



**A *Security & Defence Agenda* Report**  
Rapporteur: Jonathan Dowdall and Beatrice Hasani  
Photos: SDA  
Date of publication: **November 2010**

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## Foreword



As NATO prepares to release its new Strategic Concept, a document that will help shape the Alliance's current and future roles and missions, it is important to try to peer into the future to identify trends and issues that will shape the global security climate. One such rising theme is the Global Commons, which comprise international waters and airspace, outer space, and cyberspace. Often referred to as the connective tissue of our globalized world, the Global Commons allow the free flow of information, goods, people, and ideas across the planet.

The economic architecture of the modern world rests on assured access to the Global Commons. Keeping the Commons open to all will require international cooperation, doctrine, strategies and concepts. As NATO nations assemble in November 2010 to discuss a new Strategic Concept, it is imperative that they recognize their own reliance on the Global Commons and evolving threats to its assured access.

Modern adversaries will avoid open military confrontation with NATO. Rather, they will focus on areas where the use of military power is not suitable and where the negative impact on western society is highest: maritime transit in support of economic growth and development; critical cyber infrastructure; and space-based communication networks. Concrete steps must now be taken to increase international cooperation to prevent and better manage crises that may threaten access to the Global Commons.

To that end, Allied Command Transformation (ACT) launched a study that seeks to establish collaborative approaches with NATO nations, think-tanks, academia, industry, and partners nations beyond the transatlantic community, in order to gain a full understanding of the opportunities and challenges that face the Alliance in the Global Commons. In collaboration with ACT, the Atlantic Council of the United States and the Security and Defence Agenda, two leading American and European think-tanks, assembled an impressive group of experts from across the spectrum of stakeholders for a full day of frank discussion on the Global Commons. This report outlines the salient issues and ideas brought forth in that meeting. I anticipate that it will, in addition to the many workshops reports generated by our study, serve to elevate this important discussion of NATO's role in the global commons to the prominence it deserves.

ACT's final report, which summarizes the findings of all of our workshops, will be published in March 2011 to further support NATO's strategic dialogue during its post-Lisbon summit implementation activities.

*M. Barrett*  
*Major General*  
*ACT, Deputy Chief of Staff, Strategic Plan and Policy*





## Introduction

The panel began by outlining their vision of the global commons. Comprising the maritime, space, air and cyberspace domains, they are the interconnected networks that traverse the globe, allowing for the movement of information, goods, services and ideas that the world relies on. The global commons are also “formidable space and time hoppers”, utilised by state and non-state actors alike to obtain important strategic resources without substantial physical investment.

Maritime trade forms the backbone of the globalised economy. Financial and information services worldwide rely on cyberspace transactions. Space-borne platforms are essential to the military and intelligence functions of NATO. As such, guaranteeing stable and free access to the common domains is a fundamental prerequisite for international peace, security and prosperity. The potential economic and military ramifications of inaccessible or unstable global commons are grave.

Whilst the value of protecting the global commons was clearly acknowledged, it was noted that the real challenge was pre-empting the type of threats and “spoilers” NATO might encounter in this notoriously fluid strategic field. The panel warned that adversaries would seek the unconventional advantages of the global commons to overcome NATO’s formidable conventional means. The global commons were also qualified a hybrid environment, undergoing an accelerating rate of change that made policy planning difficult.

NATO should identify how future enemies will exploit the vulnerabilities of the global commons now, to avoid strategic shock later. Furthermore, the alliance must decide what capabilities it will need to ensure the security of the global commons against such threats, and how to share these responsibilities amongst its members. These questions go to the heart of the debate over NATO’s changing role in an increasingly interconnected world. Such con-

siderations could also fundamentally influence both the structure and function of the alliance.

Regardless, it was made clear that NATO must have a voice in the global commons if it is to maintain relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## NATO’s Role in the Global Commons

The debate began on a confident note, with recognition that the alliance was already “very much in business” protecting the global commons. Stating that “NATO today is an engaged alliance”, relevant global commons initiatives, from anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden to the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia were discussed. It must also be noted that NATO has a unique competency in the area of military command cooperation.

Key distinctions need to be considered when conceptualising global commons strategy. Protection can imply a level of absolute security that is largely impossible in the global commons. NATO’s role in protecting the global commons must be envisaged realistically. Protection in this context should in fact be taken to represent securing an acceptable level of access and stability.

To achieve such an acceptable level of security, “NATO cannot act introspectively or in isolation”. The size and nature of the global commons mean that co-operation with relevant stakeholders is necessary. Indeed, the alliance needs an increased openness to external stakeholders when developing its future strategy.

These stakeholders in part consist of non-NATO states, with the increased power and influence of the BRIC nations. With the alliance members’ small population size in relation to these states, engagement with these governments will be a prerequisite to a successful NATO policy. Indeed, NATO’s ability to articulate the interests of its members to these states is an important aspect of

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the alliance's role in the global commons.

Yet non-state stakeholders also play a key-role, such as relevant industrial, commercial and technological actors. With many spoilers now being non-state criminal or terrorist actors, skills and expertise that NATO does not currently possess need to be co-opted from the private sector. Protecting potential vulnerabilities will require extensive co-operation with non-military advisors.

To meet these needs, NATO's role in the global commons will have to involve a "comprehensive approach" to security. The wide range of potential spoilers in the global commons, both state and non-state, cannot be dealt with by military means alone. NATO will thus need to develop a "diverse array of weaponry" for use in the global commons, including legal, technological and diplomatic tools.

There is however concern that such a focus may compromise NATO's central role as a political-military alliance. This range of roles may be seen as embracing too openly the "out of area" agenda, a controversial topic for many alliance members. However, NATO cannot protect the global commons without looking beyond the north Atlantic area. In spite of these outstanding questions, the opportunities and vulnerabilities of the global commons demand NATO's immediate attention.

## NATO and the Space Domain

Space is a valuable but fragile global common. Spaceborne "enablers", from essential military intelligence satellites to commercially lucrative civilian systems, mean that international peace and stability increasingly relies upon a stable and freely accessible space domain.

Space is currently the most un-militarised and stable of the global commons, with only a few potential spoilers. However whilst this domain is the least likely to be threatened, there are new trends that will require the alli-

ance to rethink its neutral stance on space policy.

A primary factor is the rapidly increasing congestion of space. Given the relatively small number of ideal orbital locations for satellites, the general rise in both state and commercial launches is straining the available orbital vectors to capacity.

Space debris is also a serious risk to the space environment. Debris clouds from the deliberate or accidental break up of space platforms render large areas of Earth's orbit unusable, making the space domain surprisingly fragile.

These environmental factors threaten the sustainability of the space platforms that NATO members rely upon. Whilst the freedom of access to space has been historically uncontested, the increasing number of states and commercial actors operating in this domain could lead to a conflict of interests between space program stakeholders.

The issue of weapons in space must also be considered. While the topic was forcefully put onto the international agenda after the Chinese anti-satellite weapons test in 2007, recognising a weapon in space is no easy task. Any platform capable of manual direction from Earth can be collided with valuable space assets, rendering traditional treaty-based approaches largely irrelevant.

As such, caution must be exercised when proposing weaponised "fixes" to these potentially threatening developments. More passive responses, such as increased monitoring and sanctions, may be more efficient. However, there is a lack of space assets within NATO, particularly the equipment required to track and identify potential space incidents. This is as a capability area in need of investment if NATO wishes to monitor the space domain.

In line with this monitoring focus, healthy relations and the promotion of responsible behaviour are more important in the space domain than "hard power" capabilities.





Cooperation between NATO members and other space programme stakeholders will be required to manage this delicate global common. NATO's evolving diplomatic and political tools may be used to assert the alliance's agenda on space security.

There is also disagreement as to whether NATO provides the ideal platform for space security debates as the UN and EU are both larger and potentially more effective platforms for space co-operation. Despite such questions, NATO's status as a security broker warrants a coherent voice on space issues.

The discussion ended on a positive note, suggesting that the largely un-militarised nature of space offers a valuable opportunity to explore preventative dialogue with key partners. This opportunity requires proactivity on NATO's part, and the situational awareness capacity to monitor behaviour, but it is unlikely to require the commitment of significant alliance resources.

### **NATO in the Maritime Domain**

The maritime domain is the "oldest global common", and many alliance members have a long naval history. The potential for an adversary to severely damage NATO member's by denying access to global markets and scarce energy resources makes the maritime domain a pressing concern. Fortunately, the alliance's existing competencies in the area of command co-operation make it a potentially leading international maritime security player.

The discussion focused primarily on "hard power" naval capabilities, and the "ready framework for co-operation" the alliance provides in this area. However, whilst there is an increased danger of instability in the maritime domain worldwide, there is a "pull in two directions" over the nature of the threats, and how to overcome them.

At the "high end", rising naval technology investments by

the BRIC nations is introducing a significant new dynamic, challenging the traditional hegemony of NATO and its members. Chinese naval expansion in particular is a "strategic game-changer", with the vital trade routes of the Malacca Straits and Indian Ocean potential maritime flashpoints. Direct navy-to-navy battle remains unlikely, but the potential for a more assertive naval policy by both China and India raised questions about NATO's preparedness in this area.

Yet "low-end" spoilers such as piracy raise concerns about securing trade routes, as the importance of such operations depends on whether piracy is considered a temporary irritant or a lasting threat.

Accordingly, the nature of the threat environment must determine what capabilities will be required to meet these divergent threats. The high end forces capable of fleet-to-fleet actions must be weighed up against the low end forces ideal for patrolling unstable waterways. There is an obvious risk of "attempting both but covering neither", and NATO must clearly define its maritime posture to avoid this.

With the alarming decline in alliance naval capacity in the past two decades, expanding NATO operations in this area will require physical infrastructure, such as naval bases, that the alliance does not currently possess. Whatever its focus, NATO must supply the resources to match its ambitions in the maritime domain.

Whilst NATO's ability to protect the maritime commons will depend upon naval force, the rising number of naval stakeholders worldwide will make the promotion of responsible behaviour as important as physical naval presence. Greater naval capabilities amongst BRIC nations will only threaten the global commons if NATO members fail to promote stability. The role of non-military actors, especially in the area of commercial shipping, illustrate the need for NATO to co-opt experience from outside its own structures for an effective maritime policy.

## Protecting the global commons



Thus whilst NATO is a prominent naval force, its relative size and reach in this common domain means that only an integrated, diplomatically open approach can provide the necessary level of stability in the maritime sector.

### NATO and Cyberspace

Cyberspace, the “wild west of the global commons”, is a domain characterised by speed, automation, anonymity and a rapid pace of technological advancement, rendering it a very difficult environment for security actors. Vital international financial transactions and confidential alliance military data traverse the cyberspace domain. Yet the relatively low cost of a sophisticated attack makes it an asymmetric field. A major cyberattack has the potential to destroy fundamental infrastructures on a massive scale

There is thus “dire need for urgency” in improving NATO cyberdefence, as cyberspace has already proven to be an area of immense vulnerability. The compromise of US military databases in 2008 and the cyberattack on Estonia in 2007 were cited as major breaches of alliance security. These attacks, largely untraceable, demonstrated the “advanced persistent threat” faced by NATO member states in cyberspace.

The basis of an effective cyberdefence strategy is a proactive stance. Passive defences such as healthy computer maintenance can only go so far. To truly protect assets in cyberspace, NATO will need to look beyond its own systems. This will require technical expertise largely beyond the military competency of the alliance, making industry and commercial actors key partners of a comprehensive approach to security.

Potential tools for identifying and neutralising weaknesses include an increased intelligence awareness of the cyberspace environment. In spite of the work of the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, the historical difficulty of identifying perpetrators after an at-

tack illustrates the need for increased alliance tracking capabilities. This is an area where the US is leading within the alliance, raising the question of burden-sharing.

Several key conceptual questions remain when outlining exactly what kind of responses NATO could prepare for cyberdefence. A lack of “red lines” in cyberspace means that the alliance’s existing collective defence guarantees are vague. NATO may even need to redefine the parameters of an “attack” to include cyber threats.

Yet the question of retaliation raises concerns with some, who do not feel comfortable advocating offensive capabilities that may form some sort of “cyber-deterrence” regime. The likelihood that future cyber-attacks will originate from far outside the north Atlantic area provides challenging questions about NATO’s “out of area” defence remit. Therefore a counter-attack across cyberspace as an Article 5 response, though not theoretically inconceivable, is currently unlikely.

However, the sheer size of cyberspace diminishes NATO’s role in this global common. The combined internet users of China and India alone far outnumber the alliance states. There is currently no “natural leader” in cyberspace.

NATO has to accept that much of cyberspace’s infrastructure, and many of the actors within it, are beyond the reach of the alliance. Yet this lack of leadership also gives NATO the opportunity to step forward and set the international agenda on securing cyberspace, ensuring its interests are represented in this rapidly evolving field.

Intercepting cyber-threats will require NATO to rely upon the assistance of non-military security services, as well as the technical co-operation of industry experts. “Cybersecurity effectiveness requires trans-national co-operation”.





### Conclusion

The security of the global commons is intrinsically tied to the security of the north Atlantic area. NATO's role in both promoting stability and protecting access to the commons must be comprehensively assessed.

#### *Global commons – different characteristics*

Whilst it is tempting to holistically discuss the nature of the global commons, each domain has radically different characteristics. Space security focuses on the promotion of responsible behaviour, maritime security is linked to NATO's "hard power" capabilities, and cyber-security's rapidly evolving environment raises questions of deterrence and retaliation.

As such, NATO's policy response in each domain will differ in line with the threat environment, the nature of potential spoilers and the level of political engagement with relevant stakeholders.

#### *The nature of the threats*

There is a distinction between existential and "irritant" threats. Many of the threats to the global commons today, such as piracy, can be described as fitting into the former category.

However, the "worst case" scenarios in the various domains are serious, with cybersecurity in particular assuming a grave tone. Possibilities for serious upsets to the global commons exist, especially in the uncertain motives of the rising BRIC states and the fragility of the globalised economy. NATO must consider these and form contingencies for the most undesirable outcomes of these new global trends.

#### *The comprehensive approach to security*

Whilst NATO is a military alliance, it may need to utilise a growing range of political and diplomatic tools to fully engage with the challenges of the global commons. Promoting responsible behaviour and partnerships with non-

NATO stakeholders, as well as co-opting the expertise of relevant industry, commercial and legal actors, will be vital when operating in the global commons. Such non-military expertise may need to be a central part of NATO's post-New Strategic Concept structures. Such a focus may require significant reform.

#### *Situational awareness*

There is a very real lack of situational awareness capabilities in the global commons. The asymmetric ability of certain members (especially the US) to generate intelligence in the global commons was often noted as being a serious hindrance to implementing effective NATO strategy. The alliance must both increase and more evenly distribute such capabilities.

However, NATO's history of burden-sharing and strategic command capability is proof that the alliance has a valid and useful role to play in improving management of the global commons.

#### *Transatlantic trends*

There are differing opinions between Washington and Brussels over the exact role of NATO in the global commons, in particular on the essential connection between global commons issues and the "out-of-area" debate. The North American calls for NATO to lead or shape the international agenda in certain security areas is contrasted by a more modest European vision. The distinction between NATO as a north Atlantic based security enabler and a global security leader, stands as an ongoing divide in the global commons debate.

Overall the roundtable agreed that "protecting the global commons means sharing the global commons". Whilst NATO is clearly an "engaged" alliance globally, it cannot act alone in these vast global domains. Controlling every aspect of the global commons is an impossibility. NATO must focus on promoting stability rather than seeking absolute security. Above all, deciding on policy responses now will mitigate the damage or surprise of potential security crises when they arise.

## Protecting the global commons



The roundtable concluded that NATO has a valid role to play in protecting the global commons. It is now up to its member states to decide exactly how robust that role will be, and how to provide the capabilities needed to fulfil that role.

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Each year, the Atlantic Council recognizes outstanding individuals who exhibit distinguished leadership in policy, business, the military, and the arts. The 2009 awardees were President George H.W. Bush, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus, IBM chief executive Samuel Palmisano and renowned baritone Thomas Hampson. Previous recipients of awards include former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair; former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell; business leaders Rupert Murdoch and Stephen Schwarzman; and senators John Warner, Chuck Hagel, and Sam Nunn.



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*“At no other time has the Atlantic Community faced such critical and complex global challenges. Whether the matter is Afghanistan and Pakistan, energy security and climate, or dealing with a rising China and resurgent Russia, transatlantic cooperation has never been more essential.”*

**Senator Chuck Hagel**  
**Atlantic Council Chairman**

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Building on the combined expertise and authority of those involved in our meetings, the SDA gives greater prominence to the complex questions of how EU and NATO policies can complement one another, and how transatlantic challenges such as terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction can be met.

By offering a high-level and neutral platform for debate, the SDA sets out to clarify policy positions, stimulate discussion and ensure a wider understanding of defence and security issues by the press and public opinion.

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