

Sarwar A. Kashmeri

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SAVE NATO: MERGE IT WITH ESDP

NATO's challenge is to ensure that there is an on-going and vibrant strategic relationship between the European Union and the United States.

General Brent Scowcroft, dean of the American foreign policy establishment, has proposed a deceptively simple test to determine whether NATO is still relevant. His test is a question: "What is NATO for?"

There is as yet no acceptable answer to this question.

Set up in 1949 to defend against the threat of Soviet aggression, NATO today is increasingly dysfunctional, still searching for a new role two decades after the end of the Cold War. As NATO's star has dimmed, the European Union's military arm, its common security and defense policy, or CSDP, has become increasingly more cohesive and capable. It is high time to bridge NATO and CSDP and to turn over primary responsibility for defending Europe to the Europeans. That goal ought to top the agenda when NATO leaders gather in Lisbon, November 19-20, 2010 to adopt the Alliance's New Strategic Concept – its mission statement for the next decade.

Cohesion used to be NATO's hallmark, but there is little of it left. The Eastern and Central European members still consider Russia to be their main threat, while the Western Europeans no longer do. NATO believed it had found its new calling by adopting an 'out of area' strategy – transforming itself to be a world-cop – but this dream is dying a slow death in the mountains of Afghanistan, where many European nations avoid the main battles, and are already packing up to go home. And, in spite of the fact that for over a year NATO has been challenged to find resources to send a few hundred trainers to Afghanistan, it now proposes to set up a missile defense system to protect half the planet.

NATO AND AMERICA, NO LONGER A BAND OF BROTHERS

America has been losing confidence in NATO's military capabilities for years. When the Alliance volunteered to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11, the United States summarily dismissed its offer and did the job by itself. NATO supposedly runs the Afghan war. But no NATO official was present at President Obama's side when he swore in the Alliance's new Afghan commander, General Petraeus after firing General McChrystal, the previous commander. Both actions were all-American affairs and left out both NATO's Secretary General as well as the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, SACEUR, who is responsible for all NATO operations.

Part of NATO's downwards trajectory is due to demographics. The officials that surrounded President Obama at that June swearing-in were of an age that gives them an instinctive appreciation of NATO's value.

But what about the younger group of defense and security officials now moving into senior military ranks? What do they think of NATO?

On a recent visit to a United States Navy aircraft carrier, I found myself seated at dinner between two senior naval officers whose ages differed by around 20 years. I asked the older, the second in command of the warship, what he thought about NATO. The answer was an emphatic endorsement of the Alliance. "It is and will continue to be the most powerful force for safeguarding the world," he said. Later, asking the same question of the younger commander of the carrier's attack squadrons, the answer was very different. "I remain to be convinced that NATO serves a useful purpose anymore."

This confusion is even more pronounced among Americans outside the military. "You mean NATO is still around?" a New York investment banker recently asked me. And the Dean of a college in Boston assured me that she was certain NATO was not a military force any more. "Probably just humanitarian assistance" she said. A retired college professor from Arizona asked if I was sure NATO troops are serving in Afghanistan.

THE GROUP OF EXPERTS SIDESTEPS REALITY

Unfortunately, the Group of Experts set up by NATO's Secretary General to advise him on NATO's New Strategic Concept, chose to overlook NATO's dysfunction and diminished value. Instead of a dramatic course correction the Experts' report claims that:

NATO enters the second decade of the 21st century as an essential source of stability in an uncertain and unpredictable world. Looking ahead, the Alliance has ample grounds for confidence. NATO's role in maintaining the unity, security and freedom of the Euro-Atlantic region is ongoing. Its status as the globe's most successful political-military alliance is unchallenged.

It is this kind of sentimental thinking and the inability to face reality that has brought NATO to its present shaky state.

After consulting with over fifty military and government leaders from the United States and Europe, my recommendation is that NATO be bridged to CSDP and that Europeans take primary responsibility for their defense. NATO will get a new lease on life, and a bridged military alliance will at least ensure that the transatlantic allies remain connected for the times when Europe, America, and Canada wish to act together.

CSDP'S RISING TRAJECTORY

Through CSDP the European Union has already deployed on 27 missions from Africa to Asia. Most were small, but 2 years ago the EU sent a force of 3,700 European troops for a military operation in Chad and the Central African Republic. Even as the EU was engaged in Africa it organized an anti-piracy naval flotilla, twice the size of NATO's to patrol the Horn of Africa.

Both these operations illuminated the European Union's ability to project military forces long distances. In the case of its African deployment, 10,000 soldiers had to be mobilized to allowed the EU to transport and sustain a highly mobile force of 3,700 for a period of 19 months, more than 3,000 miles from Brussels. The European Union gave the Operation Commander robust rules of engagement which he had to use at an early stage of the campaign. The force was challenged by organized military units within the first 30 days and fought them off in a determined show of force.

Three main reasons account for the European Union's growing military clout:

- The EU is a governmental entity, so it can combine civilian, police, legal, and military resources to tailor holistic missions that are far better suited to winning hearts and minds than NATO, which is a military organization.

For its naval mission the EU signed a treaty with Kenya that gives Kenyan authorities the right to prosecute captured pirates. EU legal and process teams follow up with help to improve the judicial system with experts and computers.

- EU missions overcome the objections some countries have to American-led NATO forces on their territory. In the case of the EU's deployment to Chad and the Central African Republic, the local governments had made it clear that a force comprised of Americans would not be acceptable.
- Finally, CSDP is European-owned and operated, consisting of Europeans making decisions in their countries' national interests, which are not always aligned with America's.

THE CYPRUS/TURKEY POLITICAL LOGJAM

It is worth recalling that neither NATO nor the EU have an army. Both organizations use soldiers and equipment from their member nations. Both organizations have military staffs, committees, and operations headquarters that are located within a few miles of each other, but cannot officially collaborate because of interminable political issues between Cyprus and Turkey.

This expensive duplication is largely paid for by European taxpayers since 26 out of 28 NATO members are European states. In today's dire economic climate when Europeans are slashing their defense budgets, it is hard to believe that these inefficiencies will be allowed to continue.

As the United States, its largest member and lynchpin, tires of NATO members' unending internal feuds, and, responding to the new geopolitical reality, increasingly shifts its focus to Asia, NATO risks becoming even more irrelevant to the security needs of the Euro-Atlantic area.

WHAT TO DO

The only way to cut through the Cyprus/Turkey political logjam is for the United States and Canada to agree to bridge NATO and CSDP, and then begin negotiations directly with the European Union to move the plan to action.

To execute the transition of CSDP/NATO, the United States and Canada should empower United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Canadian Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon with the responsibility to negotiate with the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton.

The negotiations would aim to:

1. Draft an agreement under which the EU's CSDP will assume responsibility for defense of the European Union, and
2. Set up the mechanism for consultations between the EU, the United States, and Canada to use NATO. In this arrangement the decision as to whether NATO ought to be involved in a conflict would be made by the EU, in collaboration with the United States, and Canada. The agreement struck by the three might be similar to the just-concluded 50-year treaty between France and Britain. Neither gave up their rights to act alone as sovereign nations, but have recognized that their ability to continue to maintain strong military forces rests on pooling their most expensive assets.

The 28 heads of state gathering in Lisbon in two weeks should not get mired in NATO's unrealistic and grandiose dreams of missile shields and global security hubs. They should insist that NATO revert back to its original purpose of protecting Europe, bridge the Alliance with CSDP, and turn over the responsibility for protecting Europe to Europeans. The European Union now has the means to protect itself: all it lacks is the will. The Lisbon summit should be used to generate the will.

My answer to General Scowcroft's seminal question, "What is NATO for?" is: NATO's new purpose should be to ensure that there is a vibrant strategic relationship between the European Union and the United States.

It would be a pity to let NATO fade away because we may then have to re-invent it someday. And that will not be easy.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and is author of the upcoming book NATO 2.0: Reboot or Delete?