



# Combining Realism with Vision Options for NATO's new Strategic Concept

by Riccardo Alcaro

## Abstract

Elaborating a Strategic Concept is a delicate undertaking which implies a good deal of resolve, far-sightedness, and realism. Allies should neither search for a new North Star nor give in to the temptation of de facto acceptance of the status quo as the optimal solution. Instead, they should make choices reflecting a synthesis, not just a list, of their security priorities. In particular, they should consider the future of the allied deterrence and defence strategies in a security environment characterised by significant political and technological changes, including by thinking about steps towards withdrawing US nuclear weapons in Europe and creating an integrated missile defence system; learn the lessons from the Balkans and Afghanistan and accord greater priority to stabilisation than to rapid reaction capabilities; recognise that compromises will be inevitable if they are serious about considering Russia as a partner, and start by pausing for a while with enlargement. Allies should also make it clear that they have no ambition of turning NATO into a world gendarme and shift towards cooperative crisis management.

**Keywords:** *Nato / Strategic Concept / Nuclear weapons / Missile shield / Military missions / Crisis management*

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by Riccardo Alcaro\*

### Introduction

At the Strasbourg/Kehl summit of April 2009, the heads of state and government of NATO member states endorsed a 'Declaration on the Alliance's Security' in which, among other things, they tasked Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen with working on a new Strategic Concept to be formally approved at the Lisbon summit in November 2010. The current strategic document dates back to April 1999.

The Strategic Concept is a periodical exercise, updating and reinterpreting NATO's mission, role and tasks. Its core function is to identify elements of continuity, formalise innovations, and define a new strategic direction orienting the Alliance's action within a mid-term time horizon. It also serves another crucial purpose, that is, to revive public support by spelling out – in the clearest possible terms – why NATO, in spite of the burden and the obligations that comes with it, is still of vital importance to its member states.<sup>1</sup>

Formulating a Strategic Concept is also an opportunity for the allies to re-affirm their longstanding loyalty to the core principles of the North Atlantic Treaty: protection of member states' security and free institutions, collective defence, and the commitment to contributing to world stability and peace. For all its rhetorical flavour, the call for respect for these principles is anything but accessory. This commonality of values is the measure of NATO member states' political affinity, it steers them towards cooperation, and is a fundamental factor keeping the Alliance together. In the absence of a clearly identifiable existential threat like the Soviet Union, it is also the only factor the public is able to comprehend immediately. Over time it may be necessary for NATO to present itself increasingly as a value-based, rather than a threat-based, community.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, NATO's 'fundamental tasks' as they were spelled out in 1999 – Euro-Atlantic security, consultation, defence and deterrence, crisis management, and partnerships – have lost none of their relevance. On the contrary, a look back at some of the major developments that have since occurred shows that these tasks are even more significant today: the rift over Iraq and the difficulties in Afghanistan have made it painfully clear that the allies need to consult more systematically; the military operations in Afghanistan and the Balkans have exposed NATO's multiple deficiencies

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<sup>1</sup> On the various functions of a Strategic Concept, see Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, *Come home NATO: the Atlantic Alliance's new Strategic Concept*, DIIS Report 4, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen: 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This point is well made by, among others, Agilolf Kesselring, *NATO – towards a new Strategic Concept 2010*, Series 4: Working Paper 33, Helsinki, National Defence University, Department of Strategic and Defence Studies: 2009.

in crisis management and response; the emergence of non-state threats has made it imperative for the Alliance to establish a network of structured relations with third states and international organisations; and the Russia-Georgia war has shown that the possibility of a conventional conflicts in Europe, though remote, refuses to die.

Working out a new Strategic Concept is a delicate and not entirely risk-free endeavour. Allies might be tempted to paper over their differences to save the appearance of a healthy Alliance. On the other hand, too high expectations have probably been pinned on the new Strategic Concept. Presenting the elaboration of the new document as a quest for a new North Star would be disingenuous. It is hard to believe that in just over a year the allies will be able to find an agreement on all contentious issues, which range from relations with Russia to out-of-area operations to the fate of US nuclear weapons in Europe.<sup>3</sup> This notwithstanding, it is of great importance that NATO member states make a double effort to produce a synthesis, not just a list, of their different security interests.

### National agendas and transatlantic solidarity

NATO has a more serious problem of identity and role today than it did in 1999. As threats and challenges have increased in both number and complexity and NATO has accepted new members, the gap between the security interests of the allies has widened.

Allies generally recognise that NATO's focus extends beyond Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area, that risks related to fragile states should be paid great attention, and that non-state actors may pose as serious a threat to the security of their citizens as enemy states. However, they struggle to find a balance when it comes to the prioritisation of tasks.

The United States, while insisting on NATO's continuous salience to safeguard Europe's stability, would like to see it more engaged in addressing threats and challenges emanating from places far away from Europe and the North Atlantic. Such countries as Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, or Portugal, tend to support this stance, even though this might hinge less on their being convinced of the need for NATO to extend its tasks than on the traditionally strong Atlanticist orientation of their foreign policies.

A larger number of member states however are more reluctant to see NATO intervening all over the globe and would prefer to keep it anchored to the European theatre. This larger group is by no means homogeneous. Some countries in Western Europe, France in particular, are concerned that the Alliance may end up reflecting disproportionately the interests of the United States – i.e. that it might turn into an instrument of US foreign policy. This is why they insist so much on NATO being a forum for transatlantic security consultation on equal terms.

Things stand much differently in most of Eastern Europe. Imbalance between the North American and European components of the Alliance is hardly a problem for countries which had long suffered under Soviet rule. For the East European countries – most notably the Baltic states – NATO membership is first and foremost a way of getting

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<sup>3</sup> For a quick analysis of the issues on which allies have different views and the way this may impact the Strategic Concept's elaboration process, see International Institute for Strategic Studies, "A new strategic concept for NATO. Alliance's mission to be redefined", *Strategic Comments*, vol. 15, no. 10, London, IISS: April 2009; and Karl-Heinz Kamp, "Towards a new strategy for NATO", *Survival*, vol. 51, n. 4, August-September 2009.

access to the United States' military resources and thereby the ultimate guarantee against an aggression from Russia. Although these countries are essentially interested in NATO as a European actor, they generally support the Alliance's out-of-area initiatives (albeit committing very limited resources) probably hoping to gain a measure of gratitude from the US.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that it makes perfect sense for an alliance basically made up of European countries to concentrate on Europe and its periphery, the 'relative density' of the United States tilts the balance to other tasks, in line with its global security priorities: prevent, deter, and defend from, terrorist attacks as well as from the proliferation and possible use of weapons of mass destruction, including through crisis response operations.<sup>5</sup> When Americans think of NATO's main role today it is Afghanistan, not Europe, that comes to their minds.<sup>6</sup>

If this is the starting point, what path can the allies take when drafting the new Strategic Concept?

A first option is a low profile agreement implying a *de facto* acceptance of the status quo. The Strategic Concept would go no further than a generic re-affirmation of principles and practices, including the rule of consensus as the standard decision-making procedure, and the listing of threats and potential responses to them. In substance, it would end up being a common denominator-based compromise in which the allies would reciprocally recognise the legitimacy of their respective security interests and accept the coexistence of separate agendas within NATO.

NATO member states would take note of their divergences, and the core function of the Strategic Concept would be to induce allies to make foreign policy choices that are compatible but not necessarily common. NATO's role would be to ensure the member states' reciprocal commitment to assisting each other in case of armed attack – an apparently light obligation given the present low threat environment – and promoting cooperation and standardisation among armed forces, while operations would be carried out by coalitions of the willing including at times the use of common NATO assets. Collective defence would thus be disjointed from the notion of the inseparability of security because the allies would pursue parallel security policies, largely entrusted to national initiatives, bilateral deals, and *ad hoc* coalitions. By accepting the status quo, the allies would risk provoking further fragmentation within the Alliance.

Arguably, one should not overestimate the impact of national differences. The interest in maintaining a solid transatlantic link and ensuring stability in Europe is certainly reason enough to preserve the Alliance, as attested to by the fact that NATO has survived a number of supposedly existential crises in the past.<sup>7</sup> This argument, however, underestimates the eventuality that, without a genuine effort towards greater strategic convergence, the Alliance might slide into inaction. It also fails to take the importance of public support into account. The emphasis on common values could

<sup>4</sup> On NATO's internal coalitions see, among others, Timo Noetzel and Benjamin Schreer, "Does a multi-tier NATO matter?", *International Affairs*, vol. 85, n. 2, March 2009; Kesselring, cit.; Ringsomose and Rynning, cit.

<sup>5</sup> See the speech by US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, at the Washington seminar on the Strategic Concept, *Remarks at the NATO Strategic Concept Seminar*, 22 February 2010, available at [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/02/137118.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/02/137118.htm).

<sup>6</sup> See Christopher Chivvis, *Recasting NATO's Strategic Concept. Possible Directions for the United States*, RAND Occasional Paper, Santa Monica (CA), Arlington (VA), Pittsburgh (PA), RAND Corporation: 2009.

<sup>7</sup> For a sceptical voice on NATO's current crisis of identity, see James Sperling and Mark Webber, "NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul", *International Affairs*, vol. 85, n. 3, May 2009.

eventually become a ritual litany that the public would find it hard to feel connected with, like when mass was said in Latin in the Catholic Church to illiterate churchgoers. It is worth recalling that scant public support is already a major difficulty hampering the allied intervention in Afghanistan.

While fully reconciling widely diverging interests is a chimerical task, current divergences could be somewhat eased and a common strategic barrier could be built to contain the drift towards fragmentation. Allies can do so by injecting more flexibility into the Alliance's functioning, most notably by introducing opt-outs on certain issues – say, a specific military operation – and modifying the decision-making process so that members that opt-out give up their vote on those issues. It is indeed hard to believe that NATO can preserve its viability without becoming more flexible.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, even if NATO were to acquire a high degree of flexibility, it would still not be entirely sheltered from the peril of internal rifts. In fact, the possibility of resorting to NATO assets in the context of ad hoc coalitions could complicate the relationship among allies and discourage the use of the Alliance. But, again, it is the public opinion that would pose the most serious challenge. It would be difficult to explain that some members of the same military organisation can disagree on some operations and commitments while maintaining the required solidarity in terms of mutual assistance and defence. NATO could benefit from greater flexibility. Nevertheless, this could be traded for less legitimacy and coherence, and it is far from certain that the trade-off would be positive.

While it seems inevitable that any recipe for re-energising NATO cannot but include a measure of flexibility, it should be clear that allies shall abide by the rule that they must all contribute, according to their resources, to the Alliance's military and financial assets; and that none of them will be permitted to remain wholly passive, as has been pointed out by Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor.<sup>9</sup> This does not necessarily imply the establishment of a clear-cut hierarchy of tasks, since intra-Alliance divergences on which priority should be accorded preference reflect genuine differences in the security predicament of member states. The new Strategic Concept is likely to equally emphasise the importance of the Alliance's various fundamental tasks, such as defence and deterrence, crisis management and response, and international partnerships. Allies however should make a double effort to find more common ground on how to equip NATO – both in terms of policies and capabilities – to better perform these tasks.

### The credibility of article 5

Rarely does the North Atlantic Council or any of its auxiliary bodies release an official document without mentioning article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the legal basis for collective defence. Even though it is widely believed to contain a binding obligation to mutual defence, art. 5 is in fact less categorical. While stating that “an armed attack” against any member state should be considered an armed attack against all others, it binds allies to assist the party under attack “by taking forthwith [...] such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force [...]”. A minor problem as long as

<sup>8</sup> This is the opinion of, among others, Noetzel and Schreer, cit.

<sup>9</sup> See Zbigniew Brzezinski, “An Agenda for NATO. Toward a Global Security Web”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, n. 5, September-October 2009.

allies lived under the spectre of World War III, art. 5's wording has taken on an ambiguous tinge now that what threatens one ally's security may well be of minor or no importance to the others.

This matter cannot be dismissed as purely academic. In theory, an allied power could provide ceremonial assistance and still be respecting the letter of the treaty. This might occur if the public opinion of a given country is opposed to providing military assistance to an allied state. A September 2008 poll, for instance, recorded majorities in a number of NATO members, including Germany, Italy, and Spain, being against sending troops to defend the Baltic countries from a hypothetical aggression from Russia, despite the fact (or perhaps because of it) that memory of the Russian-Georgian war was still fresh in their minds.<sup>10</sup>

The Strategic Concept could contribute to reducing, if not eliminating altogether, the margin of interpretation of the mutual assistance clause by insisting on the notion of the inseparability of security. Simply put, this assumes that an armed attack against a NATO member would trigger an automatic response from NATO's integrated military command and therefore the mobilisation of the armed forces of all allies.

### **Territorial defence, missile shield, and nuclear forces**

Ultimately, the credibility of art. 5 hinges not so much on its interpretation as on NATO's actual ability to deter and respond to an armed attack against allied territory. Both components – conventional and nuclear – of the combination of forces the allies will continue to rely upon are susceptible to review. Today NATO faces two different kinds of conventional threats: an aggression by Russia and a ballistic attack from the Persian Gulf (i.e. Iran) or North Korea. Although both are almost universally deemed as remote eventualities, allies should not refrain from debating at length about how best to confront them. Still, it is of the utmost importance that they thoroughly ponder whether initiatives aimed at strengthening the Alliance's deterrence and defence would jeopardise cooperation with third countries, so that the net result would be less, not more, security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

This is particularly true for hypothetical safeguard measures against a Russian aggression – such as full re-activation of contingency planning for a conflict with Moscow, suspended in the early 1990s. Such measures could undermine the policy of cooperation and partnership with Moscow that NATO has – somewhat hesitantly and, at times, contradictorily – been pursuing for years. The Strategic Concept should limit itself to clarifying that the Alliance's resolve to establish constructive relationships with neighbouring countries by no means implies that it would stand by passively if security conditions along its borders were to deteriorate. The text should therefore include an explicit reference to a set of 'back-up' measures NATO is ready to take if necessary. There would be no need to elaborate. After all, NATO already resumed limited contingency planning activities (though it did not say of what kind) after the Russian-

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<sup>10</sup> Financial Times/Harris Interactive Poll, *Monthly opinions of adults from five European countries and the United States*, September 2008, [http://www.harrisi.org/news/FTHarrisPoll/HI\\_FinancialTimes\\_HarrisPoll\\_September2008.pdf](http://www.harrisi.org/news/FTHarrisPoll/HI_FinancialTimes_HarrisPoll_September2008.pdf). Significantly, the proportion of those who were against sending troops was not far below the proportion of those in favour even in the United States and Britain.

Georgian war.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of further decisions of this nature could be brought into a broader and more official strategic frame.

The question of how best to protect NATO from a ballistic attack from the Gulf is just slightly less controversial. The United States has long opted for the creation of an antiballistic missile defence system, a decision that proved to be divisive in the past but that seems to be irreversible. The good news is that in September 2009 US President Barack Obama reformulated the missile shield planned by his predecessor, George W. Bush, in a way that opened up new prospects for NATO.

Bush's plan for a ground-based missile shield stirred up tensions with Russia – which maintained the shield would undermine its nuclear deterrent – and caused some friction within the Alliance itself. Several allies resented the fact that the United States, as well as Poland and the Czech Republic – the designated sites of a battery of interceptors and a radar tracking system, respectively – failed to consult NATO partners in advance on an issue clearly relevant to the security of all of Europe. The plan also raised eyebrows because it seemed to be designed mainly to protect the continental United States. As a matter of fact, it left the south-eastern flank of allied territory exposed. By contrast, Obama's scheme focuses on medium (1000-3500 km) and intermediate (3500-5000 km) range ballistic missiles, which Iran already has or is in the process of developing (while it still lacks intercontinental capacity), thus providing protection for Europe and the Middle East, as well as the US forces deployed there, rather than the North American continent.<sup>12</sup> Since his plan is mostly ship-based and smaller than Bush's, tensions with Russia have eased. Yet, Obama's shield also comprises a land component (deals in this respect have been struck with Poland and Romania), which is reassuring for Eastern European countries, but makes it harder to close the dispute with Russia.

A remedy to this would be to involve Russia in the shield development. This option has a growing following in both the United States and Europe, up to the highest echelons. NATO Secretary General Rasmussen has described Obama's shield as being "in accordance with the principle of solidarity within the Alliance and indivisibility of security in Europe"<sup>13</sup> and has strongly supported the idea of the United States, NATO, and Russia integrating their ballistic defences.<sup>14</sup> This option would serve the double purpose of strengthening NATO's defence capacity and drying up a source of recurring tension with Moscow.<sup>15</sup> At the very least, the Strategic Concept should leave open the possibility for third countries to be involved in NATO's missile defence planning.

<sup>11</sup> Tomas Valasek, *NATO, Russia, and European Security*, CER Working Paper, Londra, Centre for European Reform: November 2009.

<sup>12</sup> According to Congressional Budget Office estimates, the option favoured by the Obama administration would actually leave eastern Turkey exposed. (Congressional Budget Office, *Options for deploying missile defenses in Europe*, Washington, DC, Congressional Budget Office: February 2009).

<sup>13</sup> "Rasmussen calls for integrated Russia, US, NATO missile system", *France 24*, 18 September 2009, [www.france24.com/en/20090918-rasmussen-russia-us-nato-integrate-missile-systems-shield-europe](http://www.france24.com/en/20090918-rasmussen-russia-us-nato-integrate-missile-systems-shield-europe).

<sup>14</sup> Anders Fogh Rasmussen, *Building a Euro-Atlantic security architecture*, speech by NATO secretary general at the Brussels Forum 2010 organised by the German Marshall Fund of the United States on 27 March 2010, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_62395.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_62395.htm).

<sup>15</sup> See, among others, Mark Fitzpatrick, "A prudent decision on missile defence", and Oliver Thränert, "NATO, missile defence and extended deterrence", *Survival*, vol. 51, n. 6, December 2009-January 2010.



**The missile shield under Bush's proposal.** The ground-based system envisaged the instalment of a battery of interceptors in Poland and a radar tracking system in the Czech Republic. Deployment was scheduled to be finalised by 2018.



**The missile shield under Obama's proposal.** The new plan comprises both sea and land components. The ship-based 'Aegis' missile defence system will be deployed on warships in the Mediterranean, off the coasts of Great Britain, and possibly in the Baltic Sea. Mobile land-based missile defences and radar systems will be deployed in Eastern Europe. Deployment will take place in four phases: 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

**Source:** BBC World Service, Congressional Budget Office.

The development of a missile defence system may go hand-in-hand with a re-examination of NATO's nuclear policy, particularly if it is built in cooperation with Russia. On the contrary, should the anti-missile system be developed without Russia and in absence of a clear understanding with Moscow, allies would have to deal with



eventual Russian countermeasures, particularly in the missile and nuclear fields. This is the context in which the continuing presence of US non-strategic nuclear warheads in NATO bases in Europe is being discussed by the allies. An effective anti-missile defence could facilitate a decision on their withdrawal, because the shield could represent as powerful a guarantee of US commitment to allied defence.<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, the Strategic Concept described the US nuclear weapons in Europe as “an essential political and military link between the North American and European members” of the Alliance and a basis for an equitable sharing of the roles, risks and responsibilities. The validity of this argument is increasingly under scrutiny. Some NATO members, notably Germany and the Benelux countries, have gone as far as to publicly favour their withdrawal, a move apparently supported by a considerable majority of the public opinion.

Doubts about the military usefulness of US nuclear weapons in Europe have mounted in the last years. NATO says they do not target any country, although there have been rumours about plans for their use against Russia or in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Yet, even in the remote eventuality of a nuclear conflict involving NATO, the US non-strategic warheads in Europe would be of little or no use. Supposing that the aircraft carrying the warheads were able to reach distant targets (these weapons were originally meant to be used in a conflict in Eastern Europe and the western lands of the Soviet Union), they would still offer a less practical array of options than the nuclear forces of NATO's nuclear weapons states – the United States, France, and Britain.

In addition, the upgrade of delivery systems – basically multi-role aircraft such as the F-16 or Tornado now in service – requires long-term planning and takes up considerable resources. The matter is particularly delicate for Germany, the only country in Europe hosting US warheads that has yet to define a credible option to extend the lifespan of its delivery systems beyond 2020. Berlin maintains that it wants to coordinate with NATO partners before making a choice on whether to pull out the bombs, but it cannot defer the decision on modernising the delivery systems for more than two or three years. Lacking such a decision, Germany will exercise a de facto unilateral option of withdrawal, shifting the burden onto the other member states and opening a serious rift within NATO. Other critical arguments include the high vulnerability of the present system to pre-emptive or surprise attacks and its very low level of readiness.

The allies should weigh carefully all factors related to maintaining nuclear forces of dubious military usefulness. NATO's conventional superiority over any potential adversary, Russia included, should also be factored in (by contrast, during the Cold War NATO's nuclear forces were aimed at offsetting the Warsaw Pact's conventional superiority).<sup>18</sup>

The political value of the US warheads in Europe is less disputed. Their presence has long been perceived as a tangible testimony of the US's commitment to defend Europe. Thanks to nuclear sharing mechanisms, it has also served the purpose of involving allies in what can arguably be seen as the highest form of defence planning and risk

<sup>16</sup> According to non official data of 2008, the United States maintains between 150 and 240 B61 gravity bombs in five NATO countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. See Hans M. Kristensen, *US nuclear weapons withdrawn from the United Kingdom*, <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2008/06/us-nuclear-weapons-withdrawn-from-the-united-kingdom.php>; and *US nuclear weapons in Europe. A review of post-Cold War policy, force levels, and war planning*, Washington, DC, National Resources Defense Council: February 2005, <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/euro/euro.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, cit.

<sup>18</sup> Thränert, cit.

sharing (the United States cannot use the warheads without the host countries' consent, not least because most bombs are carried by host countries' aircraft). The nuclear sharing mechanism contributed to some of these states' decision not to invest in an autonomous military nuclear programme.

An additional argument against withdrawal is that, once the warheads have been removed, it would be extremely difficult to re-deploy them due to the opposition of the public opinion. Finally, the fact remains that Russia holds a significant arsenal of short range, tactical and sub-strategic nuclear weapons and systems, estimated at various thousands warheads, most of them deployed in Europe. All these reasons make a number of experts doubt whether it is a good idea to pull US nuclear weapons out of Europe. In their eyes it would amount to a leap into the unknown, the consequences of which are extremely difficult to predict.

Yet, the arguments in favour of a withdrawal maintain their relevance. True a warhead pullout would probably mean a loss of status for nuclear-sharing countries. However, inasmuch as it does not result in less security for the host countries, the price of the diminished status could be bearable. Moreover, the benefits in terms of increased credibility of the disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control policies of the host countries, the US, and NATO, could outweigh these costs. Furthermore, a public diplomacy campaign aimed at explaining the pullout of US nuclear weapons from Europe as part of an effort by NATO to focus on more urgent challenges could also raise the public's awareness of those challenges, potentially increasing its support for NATO.

The argument that public opposition would make re-deployment nearly impossible is postulated upon no change in the security environment. In this case, public opinion would probably continue to be prevalently against re-deployment, not least because the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe is justified as a safeguard against potential (and highly unlikely) future contingencies. An urgent redeployment in a situation of crisis would remain a possibility, but it would also be very unlikely for a number of reasons both technical and political: why should the European allies maintain expensive double-capability aircraft without the warheads they are supposed to carry? How to maintain the necessary training? Moreover, the decision to deploy nuclear warheads in Europe during a crisis would signal a very significant escalation and would be open to adversary countermeasures. Yet, if the security environment were to change for the worse, NATO members' public opinion, or at least governments, could be persuaded to accept the weapons again, as they had been in the past.

The fact that the warheads embody, so to speak, America's commitment to Europe's defence is still a powerful argument. But this function could be reallocated to a NATO integrated missile defence system, even if it is a system for defence and not for deterrence. Some argue that the continued existence of multiple sub-strategic options at the NATO level make the US's extended deterrence pledge – ritually upheld by successive US presidents – more credible. However this argument is difficult to substantiate if an actual scenario of employment is not spelled out.

The complexity of the arguments and the divergent perceptions of the allies make it unlikely that the next Strategic Concept will fundamentally innovate on this matter, not least because even a possible pullout should not be agreed upon or carried out in haste. After all, it would create an imbalance with Russia's large arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, which Moscow seems to have no inclination to dispose of. In fact, the Strategic Concept should not go so far as to announce the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe. It should nonetheless refrain from describing it as "an

essential political and military link” and refer to it as simply an ‘element’ of NATO’s nuclear deterrent. This would amount to a tacit admission that, under certain circumstances, NATO could be ready to cut down its tactical nuclear arsenal.

The present position of Secretary General Rasmussen is to revive arms control negotiations with Russia, starting with the now dormant Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, but including also new questions related to missile defence and nuclear weapons. Russia might want to consider these matters together with the larger issue of a new European-wide security pact, as suggested by President Dmitri Medvedev. These perspectives increase the possibility that the next Strategic Concept will be written along the lines of the former Harmel Report, trying to combine the strengthening of NATO’s capabilities with the development of a robust arms control and cooperation strategy.<sup>19</sup>

### Crisis management

The Strategic Concept 2010 will have to outline, in terms that all NATO members find acceptable, the Alliance’s options to deal with those threats – terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, smuggling of weapons and materials of mass destruction – that tend to proliferate where state control is weak or absent. The new document will most likely put greater emphasis on the nexus between allied security, assistance to fragile states, and intervention in crisis areas.<sup>20</sup> It will uphold the principle, first enounced at the 2002 Prague summit, that NATO will meet security challenges “from wherever they may come”.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting the broadening of the spectrum of non-art. 5 missions, the new Strategic Concept is bound to tone down the geographical borders of the area in which instability and conflict may impact on NATO’s security, so that the Alliance’s reach will end up encompassing, at least in principle, the whole planet.

The need to develop expeditionary warfare capabilities will then continue to be at the top of NATO’s military transformation agenda. In 2002, allies launched the NATO Response Force (NRF), an inter-service corps of highly specialised troops, equipped with the most modern technologies, capable of being deployed on short notice to distant, inhospitable places. At the 2006 Riga summit, allied leaders endorsed the Comprehensive Political Guidance (CPG), which set the goal for NATO of being able to conduct a plurality of major and minor operations simultaneously. The CPG also set ambitious thresholds regarding the proportion of the allies’ deployable and deployed (or planned to be deployed) armed forces: 40% and 8%.

NATO would probably do itself a favour by moving on to re-appraise its expeditionary forces targets in light of its experience in crisis management operations.<sup>22</sup> The thresholds of deployable troops should be revised, taking account of the fact that a

<sup>19</sup> Both supporters and sceptics of the pullout of US warheads from Europe acknowledge that it should be accompanied by an asymmetric reduction of Russia’s forces. See Franklin Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake, *Germany opens Pandora’s box*, CER Briefing Note, London, Centre for European Reform: February 2010; Wolfgang Ischinger and Ulrich Weisser, “NATO and the nuclear umbrella”, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 February 2010; Martin Butcher (rapporteur), *Roundtable on ‘Nuclear weapons policies and the NATO Strategic Concept review*, House of Commons, London, 13 January 2010.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the potential implications of a shift towards failed states and non-states actors, see Chivvis, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Prague Summit Final Declaration, paragraph 3, 21 November 2002.

<sup>22</sup> See Jens Ringsmose e Sten Rynning, cit.

large operation in Afghanistan and a minor one in Kosovo – where, in early 2010, NATO had almost 90,000 and slightly less than 10,000 troops, respectively – have put the allies' armed forces under almost unbearable strain.

<b>International Security Assistance Force – troops contributions As of March 5, 2010</b>	
NATO	86,635
United States	50,590
European Union members	31,124
<b>Total</b>	<b>89,480</b>
<b>Kosovo Force – troops contributions As of February 26, 2010</b>	
NATO	8,136
United States	1,480
European Union members	7,554
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,923</b>
<b>Source:</b> International Security Assistance Force, <a href="http://www.isaf.nato.int/">http://www.isaf.nato.int/</a> ; Kosovo Force, <a href="http://www.nato.int/KFOR/">http://www.nato.int/KFOR/</a>	

More critical still is to calibrate military objectives to the kind of tasks NATO forces have had to perform during the last eleven years. In theory, the NRF was conceived as a force able to intervene in hostile theatres and conduct high-intensity combat operations. In practice, it has been used for humanitarian and rescue operations (in Pakistan's Kashmir after the devastating October 2005 earthquake and in Louisiana following the flooding in New Orleans) and in air patrolling (during the Athens Olympics in 2004). Such operations are indicative of NATO's flexibility, but they can hardly be deemed priorities. The relatively scarce level of interest in the NRF is attested to by the difficulties European NATO members have come up against in ensuring the force's sustainability in spite of its limited size (20-25,000 troops).

For sure, the ultimate problem with the NRF, as with all other NATO forces, is the political unwillingness to make use of it, that is, the allies' reluctance to entrust the integrated military command with actually conducting combat operations.

Even when factoring in this point, however, the question of whether the military calculation behind the NRF is correct still stands. Rather than conventional open warfare, NATO forces have performed peacekeeping, stabilisation, and counterinsurgency tasks in the context of broader international institution-building efforts. NATO troops have faced other problems than prevailing over a conventional enemy to establish a bridgehead in hostile territory. They have struggled to learn how to ensure long-term sustainability of, and adequate logistic support for, troops deployed in distant and inhospitable theatres; how to fight an insurgency barely detectable among civilians; how to train local friendly forces to the extent that they can be given responsibility for territorial control; and how to integrate military operations and reconstruction. Since the operations in Afghanistan and the Balkans have absorbed the bulk of the resources the allies – with the exception of the United States – have spent on operations, it makes sense to reflect on whether a shift from rapid reaction to

stabilisation and counterinsurgency capabilities would not serve NATO's purposes better.<sup>23</sup>

## Societal security

The speed at which NATO has been expanding the range of its tasks over the last years has left many bewildered. In fact, NATO planners have struggled to keep pace of the evolution in the security landscape. As the once all-dominant paradigm of territorial defence has faded, the emphasis has shifted towards such broader notions as societal security, which encompasses the safety and security of ordinary citizens, as well as protection of the nerve centres that ensure critical societal functions: transport, energy production, health care, information, communication, etc. In this regard, NATO's new Strategic Concept should confirm the Prague principle – to meet challenges “wherever they may come from” – in a broader sense, as a functional rather than as a simple geographic indication. Given the fact that Art. 5 only relates to military attacks, these developments are bound to increase the importance of Art. 4 of the Treaty, thus putting a new emphasis on coordination and cooperation outside the borders of defence and deterrence. The development of a new, broader security concept will probably be an important part of NATO's new strategy.

At stake for NATO is more than turning the page on the debate on in-area vs. out-of-area operations once and for all (by now the debate seems largely academic, as NATO operating without geographical constraints has become a fact of life). It is also building a multi-layered defence able to reduce the vulnerabilities of allied societies. Such issues as cyberdefence, counterterrorism, antipiracy, civil emergencies, containment of the security effects of humanitarian disasters (both natural and man-made), and energy security, will find their way into the strategic document NATO leaders are about to endorse.

Nonetheless, allies would be better off if they followed a criterion based on a realistic assessment of the resources and marginal utility of these various tasks. It is the added value that NATO would potentially bring that should determine whether or to what extent it should become involved in certain matters, not the salience of the matter itself. Such added value varies depending on the tasks. While in certain cases NATO's involvement should be regarded as structural – that is, as an essential addition to its core missions – in others it would be better to proceed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, NATO cannot shirk the responsibility of setting up a cooperative system of cyberdefence that would not only secure military information and digital assets and ensure mutual inter-allied assistance, but would also provide support for the protection of cybernetic systems controlling key civilian infrastructures.<sup>24</sup>

Sea patrolling in counterterrorism and antipiracy endeavours – NATO is operating on both fronts with its Active Endeavour mission in the Mediterranean and Ocean Shield

<sup>23</sup> This point is convincingly made by Mats Berdal and David Ucko (“NATO at 60”, *Survival*, vol. 51, n. 2, April-May 2009).

<sup>24</sup> To its credit, NATO was quick to take up the digital gauntlet after the weeks-long cyberattack on Estonia in the spring 2007, allegedly carried out by Russian hackers, by adopting a Policy on Cyber Defence as well as establishing a Cyber Defence Management Authority and the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, significantly based in Estonia's capital, Tallinn (see Rex B. Hughes, *NATO and Cyber Defence. Mission Accomplished?*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Ap: 2009nr1/4).

mission off the Somali coast – seems sensible as long as it remains complementary to a broader international effort.

Equally important is to highlight NATO's readiness – on the basis of an ad hoc decision which takes both political and practical expediency into account – to get involved in civil emergency management and undertake rescue and humanitarian assistance operations, whereas it is harder to discern what role NATO can play in energy security. It could certainly provide protection for key energy infrastructure, but there is no legal basis – nor political rationale, for that matter – for a military response to an interruption in energy supplies. Allies might set up mechanisms to provide each other with mutual assistance in case a sudden, unprovoked cut-off in imports jeopardised a member's energy needs, but this seems to pertain to multilateral frameworks – both ad hoc and institutional, like the EU – other than NATO.

### NATO in Europe and the world

Since the adoption of the current Strategic Concept in 1999, NATO strategists have kept working on the definition of a model approach to 21st century security based on a logic of cooperation.<sup>25</sup> This implies structured ties with other international organisations along the so-called 'interlocking institutions' pattern, as well as partnerships, dialogues and more specific forms of military assistance or cooperation (such as training, security sector reform assistance, and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes) with third states or groups of states. As a by-product of this model, NATO planners have developed a 'comprehensive approach' to crisis management, according to which NATO forces deployed in crisis theatres should be able to connect systematically with other international institutions, local actors, and non-governmental organisations.

There are several reasons – entirely valid to this day – why the new Strategic Concept should emphasise the importance of a cooperative security-oriented approach. In so doing the Alliance would, in the first place, soften potential competition with other organisations, most notably the European Union. Analysts and experts have used up gallons of ink in the attempt to find ways to avoid duplications and foster synergies in the troubled EU-NATO relationship. These efforts have not been futile. Twelve years after the EU embarked on the difficult process of developing an autonomous military arm, there is now growing convergence in at least two fields.

First, notwithstanding an irremovable degree of latent competition, NATO and the EU are much more willing today to recognise each other as parts of the same European security architecture. The EU performs a number of soft security tasks that NATO is ill-equipped to manage, but its relevance extends beyond the potential complementarities between NATO and the civil and civil-military components of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The Union plays an essential role in the management of complex issues with clear security implications – suffice it to mention relations with Russia and former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. While NATO has an indispensable stabilising effect on Europe, the EU – thanks to a number of sectorial cooperation initiatives, all susceptible to further deepening – has

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<sup>25</sup> For the notion of 'cooperative security' see, among others, Klaus Wittmann, *Towards a new Strategic Concept for NATO*, NDC Forum Paper n. 10, Rome, NATO Defense College: September 2009.

more potential to transform the European strategic context, tilting the balance towards cooperation rather than competition.

The second field is the integration of European defence markets. While this is intrinsically linked with the EU's desire to sharpen up its security credentials, it is in the interest of both the United States and NATO. CSDP development spurs an EU-wide cost and resource rationalisation as well as harmonisation of procurement programmes, offering European governments a valuable alternative (arguably the only alternative) to the politically costly decision to increase defence budgets. Insufficient levels of military spending are notoriously a sore point within NATO, as just a handful of allies (Britain, France, Greece, Turkey, and the United States) have lived up to the pledge of keeping defence budgets at 2% or more of gross domestic product. The 2008-09 recession will likely result in further constraints on defence spending, making integration an even more pressing urgency.

Structured cooperation with third states or groups of states is of the utmost importance for NATO because it also contributes to containing interstate rivalries, most notably with countries such as Russia. It may be true, as some leading commentators argue, that the allies irresponsibly neglected Russian security concerns after the Soviet Union's dissolution.<sup>26</sup> In all probability, NATO member states displayed tunnel vision when they failed to appreciate the full extent of the implications of some of their choices to which Russia was most opposed. The Alliance's eastern enlargement, the bombing campaign against Yugoslavia/Serbia, support for Kosovo's independence, are just a few of the items in the Kremlin's packed cahiers de doléances vis-à-vis NATO. And yet, the fact that Russia's 2009 security strategy still identified NATO as the main 'danger' to its security interests can be attributed only in part to the Alliance's real or imaginary blunders. The Kremlin may have substantial reasons to believe that the post-Cold War security order in Europe insufficiently reflects its legitimate concerns. But its proposals for new arrangements – such as Russian President Medvedev's idea of a new European security treaty – seems to be aimed at advancing claims rather than setting shared objectives.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, whatever its real motive, NATO would be doing itself harm if it did not agree to meet Moscow's call for a re-thinking of European security halfway.<sup>28</sup> Russia remains and will remain an indispensable component of NATO's self-definition. Since it has long decided that Russia is no longer an enemy, the Alliance should come to terms with the fact that it cannot always have it its way if it wants Moscow to be a partner. There is plenty of room for cooperation on select dossiers, such as counterterrorism, drug trafficking, non-proliferation and the reduction of nuclear arsenals (although, strictly speaking, this pertains to US-Russia bilateral relations), and the stabilisation of Afghanistan (Moscow's decision to let military furniture bound for ISAF forces transit on its territory has probably had less media coverage than it deserves). Russia and NATO

<sup>26</sup> This is the opinion of, among others, Brzezinski (cit.), as well as of Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry ("The unravelling of the post-Cold War settlement", *Survival*, vol. 51, n. 6, December 2009-January 2010).

<sup>27</sup> The text can be read on the Kremlin's website at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2009/11/223072.shtml>. For a Russian perspective on how to build a new Euro-Atlantic security compact, see Vladimir Baranovsky, Alexander Dynkin, and Igor Yurgens (eds.), *The architecture of Euro-Atlantic security*, Moscow: Library of Institute of Contemporary Development, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> For a view of European security as resting on several pillars – NATO, the US, the EU, and Russia – see Riccardo Alcaro and Emiliano Alessandri, "Engaging Russia. Prospects for a long-term security compact in Europe", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 15, n. 2, May 2010.

interests are not incompatible even in the Arctic region, in spite of recent anxieties over mounting tensions there. Beyond theatre – such as the much publicised planting of a Russian flag on the North Pole – Moscow seems unwilling to radically alter the set of rules and practices that discipline regional relations in the High North, as shown by its recent agreement with Norway over a disputed area in the Barents Sea.<sup>29</sup>

NATO could also make use of unexplored options to re-cast relations with Russia in a cooperative mould. For instance, it could revive key arms control mechanisms such as the 1991 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. Protesting that not enough attention was paid to its security concerns, in 2007 Russia said it would no longer consider itself bound by the CFE Treaty-set limits on conventional forces size and deployment. NATO countries, on their part, have refused to ratify the updated version of the treaty, which was amended in 1999 to adjust the limits on a national basis rather than on a bloc basis (the agreement was negotiated when the Warsaw Pact still existed). They have insisted that Russia must first withdraw its troops from Moldova and renegotiate the presence of its troops in Georgia. In light of their inability, or unwillingness, to make Russia reverse its action in the Caucasus, the allies should reconsider their position.

A re-adjustment in NATO-Russia relations can hardly be conceived of without taking the Alliance's enlargement policy into account. The Kremlin has made clear it can under no circumstances accept that the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia join NATO. The often heard argument that the Alliance cannot tolerate a Russian veto on its choices is somewhat misleading, or at the least simplistic, in that it is sometimes interpreted as if it implied that allied governments would be worse off if they weighed the implications of new accessions against maintaining good relations with Russia. Ukraine extends deep into European Russia and along the coasts of the Black Sea, Moscow's only entry to the Mediterranean. It is a country tied to Russia by history, traditions, culture, economy, and the circulation of people. Georgia, on its part, has two unsolved territorial disputes with Russia. NATO cannot think of admitting either country without first considering the implications these decisions would have on its relations with Moscow.

The new Strategic Concept does not have to renege NATO's 'open door' policy, but it would be better to insist that allies thoroughly examine the potential added value that new accessions would bring to Euro-Atlantic security. This would lead to a *de facto* enlargement freeze – a sub-optimal solution but nonetheless a wise mid-term choice (an exception could be made for the Balkan states, although prudence should be the rule when it comes to Serbia or such fragile states as Bosnia and Kosovo). It also seems to fit with the current political predicament, as the Obama administration has more pressing priorities (including implementing its 'reset' policy with Russia) and one of the two would-be members, Ukraine, has just elected a Kremlin-leaning president.

NATO could build upon an understanding with Russia on the European theatre to establish regular contacts with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO),<sup>30</sup> the Russian-led entity comprising a number of former Soviet republics, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a smaller group which also includes China. This would be a first step towards creating a common framework to discuss the security of Eurasia, a macro-area in which the interests of great powers intersect with

<sup>29</sup> For a balanced analysis of the Arctic predicament, see Sven G. Holtsmark, *Towards cooperation or confrontation? Security in the High North*, NATO Defence College Research Paper no. 45, February 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Brzezinski, cit.



regional state rivalries and a number of threats to which NATO countries are exposed proliferate (the insurgency in Afghanistan and its impact on Pakistan's stability, religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking). A structured dialogue seems to be an obligatory step to keep regional states from sliding into zero-sum competition and prevent great powers from getting ensnared by dangerous hegemonic temptations.

If NATO were able to connect constructively with the CSTO and, even more so, the SCO, it would boost its own evolution from regional organisation to global actor – not, however, as the world's gendarme, but rather as a responsible actor that praises self-constraint and cooperation as key instruments for fostering international stability. The point is not to turn NATO into the 'hub' of a large network of security organisations, although the Alliance's greater expertise and resources would likely trigger a dynamic of this sort, but to create an ever larger and more solid platform for cooperative crisis management.

From this perspective, it would be best if the Strategic Concept clarified that the only conceivable hub of a network of security organisations is the United Nations. The document should put renewed emphasis on the principle, stated already in the Washington Treaty, that NATO accords great importance to cooperation with the UN, as well as with other states or groups of states. The various partnerships NATO has established over the years – Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, dialogue with contact countries, as well as cooperation with the African Union – should be subordinated to this broader strategic orientation.

## Conclusions

Since 1999, when the current Strategic Concept was endorsed, NATO has struggled to adapt to an evolving context and the emergence of asymmetric challenges. Not always have allies seen eye-to-eye on changes, and this has contributed to a proliferation of sometimes conflicting priorities. Interest fragmentation has brought about fluid coalitions of like-minded member states, which have however proven to be unable to build on their occasional agreements to forge shared long-term strategies.

No doubt, the disappearance of long-established points of reference, such as the danger of a conventional or nuclear conflict against the Soviet Union, has contributed to NATO's sense of strategic bewilderment. Consolidation of Europe's stability continues to be a fundamental goal, but as long as the areas of latent conflict are successfully contained and 'cleared' – a still ongoing process in the Balkans – NATO's salience diminishes. This is true, in particular, for the United States, whose foreign policy priorities now extend well beyond Europe's borders.

This is not to say that NATO is going to vanish any time soon. Democratic affinity and decades of tested friendship steer allies towards cooperation almost by default. Furthermore, no ally has ever put its NATO membership into question, although the intensity of commitment is not the same everywhere. The Atlantic Alliance is still a community of values and, though to a lesser degree than in the past, a community of security interests.

Drafting a new Strategic Concept provides an opportunity to reduce gaps between the different security interests of the member states so long as this coincides with a realistic and balanced assessment of what NATO represents, does, and should – or should not – do.

NATO countries should, first of all, shed light on ambiguities surrounding their mutual assistance obligations. They should then consider whether breaking with both old and newly established practices would amount to an act of far-sightedness or a leap into the dark. The main cases in point in this regard are the development of missile defences, a re-appraisal of the role of US nuclear weapons in Europe, and according a preference to stabilisation and counterinsurgency over rapid reaction capabilities. Furthermore, they should shelve the ambition of turning NATO into the world's gendarme or even the hub of a network of security organisations, and instead calibrate NATO's international partnerships according to the strategic goal of fostering cooperative crisis management. Finally, they should make 'creative' use of the inextinguishable ambiguities of a 28-strong military alliance so that NATO can adapt to both contingent and structural changes without losing appeal for its members. If bold choices were made, open acknowledgement of irreconcilable differences would not sound like a weakness. Instead, it would be a sign of NATO's vitality and indirect proof of its resilience.

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