Squaring the circle: Fitting force transformation into NATO’s Lisbon reform programme

January 27, 2011
Stanhope Hotel, Brussels
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Introduction

Speaking to assembled participants from across the European security and defence community, General Stéphane Abrial, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, welcomed the opportunity to “discuss the issues that are at the heart of my command’s mandate”. During this wide ranging debate, questions of national sovereignty in equipment sharing, the role of industrial and civilian partners in supporting force transformation and the need for a balance between capabilities were key themes. Overall, the General concluded that “the main challenges we face in transforming our forces can be overcome. They are not insurmountable, it just looks that way” he added jokingly.

Force transformation

a matter of will, cost and engagement

General Abrial began the evening by outlining NATO’s renewed focus on force transformation. Whilst the current debate is being framed by the fall-out of the fiscal crisis (a condition likened to a “budgetary winter” by a national chief of defence), the General made it clear that this was not the only driving factor. “Transforming our forces is at the heart of reforming NATO”, he stated, and “would have been desirable whether or not our nations’ public debts are reaching breaking point”. Indeed, in the wider context of a changing military balance since the end of the Cold War, and the rise of various new and anticipated security threats, “it would have been simply unsustainable for NATO to do business as usual”.

Bearing this in mind, General Abrial went on to explain the three factors which he believes must underpin a successful force transformation agenda; political will, cost effectiveness and engagement with new security partners.

In terms of political will, the General invoked the image of a “battle of the will to stay involved” with NATO’s commitment to maintaining sufficient defence budgets. Highlighting global defence trends which have seen an increase in total military spending, he noted that “the Lisbon Summit called for sustained defence spending not once, but twice”, in order to re-affirm member state commitment to this “battle” of the will.

The next focus was cost effectiveness. The General outlined his firm belief that there are “very significant potential sources of efficiency” to be found in procurement and the training of new forces through pooling and sharing defence equipment. However, “establishing these solutions is not easy, especially in the field of procurement” because “these are areas that are close to the core of national sovereignty”. Despite these difficulties, member state cooperation, as typified by the recent Anglo-French treaty, pointed to a potential model for other states.
NATO would also have to accept that “it is not alone in seeking such solutions” in efficiency. With the EU also making important efforts in these areas, “neither organisation will be able to ignore the initiatives at work in its counterpart”, especially in terms of equipment. The important role of industrial actors was also outlined. “We should be able to interact very freely with industrial partners” in steps that are far removed from acquisition, General Abrial concluded, on a theme that would be elaborated by several participants later.

The final focus was rooted in Secretary General Rasmussen’s call for an Alliance that is “engaged” with security partners worldwide. In a globalised world where “distance is no protection, many vulnerabilities materialise in areas beyond the reach of any single nation”. As a result “NATO cannot live as if it was a self sufficient organisation”, and an important aspect of force transformation is the need to synergise with exterior partners, organisations and militaries.

This effort must see NATO begin cooperation “well upstream of operations themselves”. The value of cooperation, such as joint training operations with non-NATO members, also offers new economies of scale, the General elaborated. “Opening up our NATO training facilities, centres of excellence and even our exercises to partner troops is of benefit to all, as the marginal costs for us leads to greatly increased interoperability in theatre”.

The SACT concluded by addressing the “human” aspect of transformation. Referencing US Marine Corp Charles C. Krulak and the concept of the “strategic corporal”, Abrial insisted that transformation would only be successful when it was rooted in the training, ethos and culture of a military’s fighting men and women. As such, “new tasks, new formats, and new responsibilities” for individual soldiers make up “the core of force transformation as I conceive it”.

**Issues of sovereignty and resource-sharing**

The debate was now thrown open to the floor, with the theme of asset-sharing and multinational procurement initiatives coming under immediate scrutiny. Brooks Tigner, EU/NATO Affairs Correspondent for Janes’s International Defence Review, pointed out the more painful aspects of resource sharing. “For pooling and sharing to work, some nations, or someone, has to lose”, he said. “Rationalising means someone loses a budget, someone loses a capability, a base; are nations willing to do this”?

The General Abrial agreed that sharing resources was a sensitive issue, and that “there are some capabilities which nations think forms an indispensable part of their national sovereignty”. Whilst efficiency may be the goal, inevitably, force reductions and cuts will indeed occur amongst individual members.

However, faced with declining financial resources, member states keep being forced to think realistically about the requirements of force transformation, and the need for capabilities which for many are simply out of reach. The reality, the General asserted, is that “you cannot
keep everything single-handedly anymore”. The SACT continued to express confidence that “despite the difficulties of implementation in the constrained framework”, there was a willingness to collaborate that cut across sovereignty issues.

Drawing upon a known example, Giancarlo Grasso, Senior Advisor to the Chairman and CEO of Finmeccanica questioned the spirit of collaboration presented by the Anglo-French initiative. Was it not true, he asked, that this bilateral path represented “a lack of confidence in the role that NATO should play in harmonising and harnessing” transformation efforts?

Refuting this interpretation, the General was adamant that “They are a complement. Nations are sovereign, and NATO does not work in isolation, it works with the nations. In many senses, NATO is the nations”. What would be important for ACT was “identifying the factors that make such cooperation work, for other members to analyse”. Far from fearing bilateral agreements, the General welcomed them as valuable case studies, “to make sure we identify the trends...for both best practices and things we might advise not to do again”.

Velizar Shalamanov from the NATO Consultation, Command and Control Agency wanted to delve into the specifics of sharing and pooling, asking “what are the most suitable capabilities that could be addressed in multinational projects”? The most important factors in a shared project’s success, the General responded, were “the ones for which the nations really have something in common; common aims, common timetables, and a common vision”. Although alluding to European programmes such as the Eurofighter and A400M, the General declined to “name and shame” problematic examples, merely asserting that “if there is any ambiguity, in the end, you pay for it”.

The SACT thus concluded that as long as you shared a common vision with your partner, resource pooling initiatives “can be applied to any capabilities”, and given the efficiencies this can produce, are a vital component of force transformation.

Developing partnerships – civilian actors

Attention now turned to the need for new partners in supporting forces transformation. Cooperation with the EU was a key theme, with Hartmut Bühl, Publisher of the European Security and Defence Union raising the lack of references to the CSDP at Lisbon, and NATO’s Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges Jamie Shea asking “what useful role can multinational organisations such as the EDA play” in ACT’s efforts.

The General agreed that multilateral groupings provided an important resource for NATO in developing solutions for force transformation. Whilst sometimes lacking the resources of NATO departments, the EU’s nascent defence structures offered an alternative “voice” which ACT would attempt to synthesise into their agenda, the General explained. “We will try to find agreements, small groupings, regional or otherwise, and we will need these forums to make sure people exchange ideas, and develop a common picture. This you cannot achieve if you speak to only one person”, he concluded.
Robin Davis, Head of the EU Cultural Relations Team in the British Council, cited the findings of the SDA’s 2010 Online Security Jam, and asked the General about the peace-building capabilities of NGO’s and civilian agencies. Given the wealth of experience held by the UN and national actors in these areas, “how can this expertise support NATO”, he asked?

Abrial used the opportunity to clarify that “not everyone [member states] has the same objective or vision” when it comes to civil-military relations. Developing the so-called “comprehensive approach” was an important part of NATO’s reform agenda after Lisbon, he continued, but “it is not a mission, it is an approach”. Therefore, it is not for ACT to give specific advice on the doctrinal choices of member states in this area.

This being said, a clear priority of force transformation would be better coordination with civilian actors in-theatre. Historically this had proven difficult, he elaborated, because “many people are not ready to talk to men in uniform”, especially in the UN. In Afghanistan, ISAF has to work with the fact that “some NGO’s just don’t want to know us”, which makes reforming civil-military structures harder.

However, the realities on the ground in Afghanistan were helping to forge new civil-military links. “We have started very constructive dialogues with some parts of the UN”, the General reported, who were now “bringing something to table” for ACT to develop into cooperative structures. In the future, the General concluded, a reformed civil-military approach would make sure that all actors were “ready to act together the day we are going to deploy together”.

“If you stop investing in defence, you can lose capacity very fast.”

Developing partnerships - industrial actors

The role of the defence industry in supplying the equipment required for force transformation was now examined. Jean Fournet, Former NATO Assistant Secretary General, enquired about the role of industry in developing new capabilities for the Alliance. Later, Joseph Stein, Deputy Defence Advisor to the United States Mission to NATO focused on research and development. “Many good things have been developed, but there is a wall between experimentation and implementation, because when you get to that stage, you have to re-compete”, Stein explained. “How can we bridge that gap and make a more responsive use of new technologies”?

The General heartily agreed that the development of new equipment by the defence sector, at a cost bearable to member state budgets, was a pre-requisite to successful force transformation. ACT’s goal, General Abrial continued, was to “make sure that we identify the best capabilities out there, the possibilities, and to make nations aware of what we discover”. Throughout the evening’s discussion new technologies such as missile defence and cyber capabilities were raised, highlighting the new capabilities member states will need to develop in the coming years.
To improve the transition from research to procurement, the General outlined his vision of future ACT-industrial relations. “We need to associate the industry in the very early stages of capability development, pre-procurement, because as long as there is no money involved, we can talk”, he explained. Such pre-production dialogue, carried out under conditions of “total transparency when we come to discussing specific projects, and a guarantee of protection of information”, would be beneficial to both NATO members and industry stakeholders. “Sharing with industry our vision of the future, and what the industry sees as possible for that future”, can improve cost effectiveness and procurement speed, the SACT opined.

However this approach was questioned by Peter Rasmussen, Industrial Advisor in NATO’s C3 Agency, who expressed concern that such an approach risked marginalising the concept of “industrial diversity”. Noting that the players most likely to be able to afford pre-production engagement with NATO were larger companies, Rasmussen asked “how do you engage small and medium sized (SMES) businesses from smaller NATO member states“?

The General agreed that there was a frustratingly delicate balance to be struck between the nurturing of SMES and maintaining the large scale producers that would underpin force transformation. He also described a disappointing industry uptake from his offer to attend ACT conferences in the US. “I asked them, please come to Norfolk, talk to delegates from all nations, who are going to prepare the capabilities of tomorrow for all members...They said no”. Whist progress was being made, he thus conceded “I have not found the solution yet” in this balancing act.

“Surviving the surprise” – a matter of balance

This theme of balance underpinned the entire evening’s debate, and highlighted the complex decision-making that has to occur prior to force transformation. Budgets were an obvious focus. David Rudd, Strategic Analyst at the Canadian Department of National Defence, agreed with the SACT’s idea that defence cuts provided an opportunity to rationalise forces. However, he also feared that NATO risked going “back to 1999”, and experiencing a “Kosovo” moment. The dual forces of withdrawing from Afghanistan and the financial situation risked creating a “chasm in capabilities” between Europe and the US, as was identified during the infamously resource-starved Kosovo War.

The General appreciated this danger, with the balance between cuts and reform leaning more towards cuts across Europe. “We are running the risk of facing a momentum to continue budget cuts, and to decrease defence institutions”, he warned. However General Abrial was confident that the realities of force transformation had created a sense of urgency. Indeed, the “huge amount of work” slated after the Lisbon Summit in a “very tight timeframe”, emphasised this urgency. “If you stop investing in defence, you can lose capacity very fast”, he cautioned, in terms of both training and equipment. The reality was that “budgets are a driver, but they should not be the driver”, the General asserted.

Building on this assertion, SDA Director Giles Merritt
wanted to drill down into the General’s vision of capability priorities, and specifically to ask, “what would you like to see less of in NATO armed forces? Because it seems to me your transformation isn’t just about transforming forces, it’s about getting rid of legacy equipment. What should we be looking for?”

The General exclaimed that “it was almost impossible to directly identify the parts of the legacy we don’t need”. Continuing, he made it clear that “we need to think of the future balance” when re-structuring our land, air and naval capabilities. “We cannot get rid of everything, and we should not. We do not know what tomorrow will be”, the General explained. “Today we’re concentrating on threats in very different domains”, such as asymmetric warfare and missile defence, but this may not be true forever. “So don’t ask me if we still need frigates, tanks, jets” he said. “We will still need them, but in various balanced numbers, and it is our task to find this balance”.

At its core, balance is important because of the need to “survive the surprise”, the General continued. “When you look back to military history, it is a single string of strategic surprises”, he explained. These surprises inevitably deliver a “tactical blow”, be it from an unexpected avenue of attack or a new threat, which can only be recovered from if you have a healthy balance of capabilities and capacities. “We [military actors] are always caught by surprise, and have to get back up again”, he explained. Those nations or alliances that last are the ones who are capable of surviving such surprises. It is for this reason that “we have to be very prudent when we say we can get rid of pieces of equipment from the past, and very prudent when we assess the training and human aspect of transformation”, the General summarised. New threat priorities, new approaches and new capabilities must be weighed against the likelihood of existing technology or doctrines leading to a crisis on the world scene.

Conclusion

So transformation, for all its focus on new structures and equipment, must also involve a careful balance between new and old. The Alliance has a long way to go. It is being asked to chart a path between budgetary retrenchment and reform, collaboration and sovereignty, big and small industry, civilian and military capabilities. Yet with political will, cost efficiency and a more engaged approach, the General concluded that it may just be possible to square this circle.
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