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NATO and its New Strategic Concept

– Aspirations and Limitations in a Sphere of Ambiguity –

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Addressing a "New Strategic Concept" suggests a fresh start into a different future. And one can identify elements of that if one refers to the events and discussions over the last few years. However, if one starts to look at and reflect the past 20 years, one will recognise a rather solid evolution from the 1991 Strategic Concept (S.C.) throughout several summit declarations and the S.C. 1999 as well as the subsequent measures and actions, in particular after 9/11 2001. Many issues and themes addressed with the new S.C. 2010 have been part or even the focus of many deliberations, decisions and activities of the Alliance before.

This becomes very obvious if one considers the "three essential core tasks". There is no doubt that collective defence, including deterrence, crisis management and cooperative security played a crucial role for the formulation of the 1999 S.C.

The difference encompasses two critical aspects: Firstly, there is a clear answer to all those who doubted that the nations could focus on the future challenges and find a consensus on a way forward beyond the struggle in Afghanistan. Secondly, with the New Strategic Concept agreed at the Lisbon Summit the nations are expressing a clear "Yes" to become a genuine Alliance for the 21st century. In this respect, it reaches beyond the Eurocentric view of the 1999 S.C. and concisely describes NATO's role in a globalised world.

The work that stems from this "blueprint" (Rasmussen) will show to what extent all nations draw identical conclusions from the statements and are thus ready to implement the concept together.

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Collective Defence – New Areas and Dimensions

The S.C. 2010 forcefully underlines that defence and deterrence as core tasks are of critical importance for a cohesive alliance. But the concept broadens the perspectives on both sides of this equation. Many players in politics, the military and research are used to interpret collective defence as coping with "armed [conventional and/or nuclear] attack" against the territory of member nations, and therefore they tend to limit the meaning of deterrence and defence to those represented by the military means of NATO and its member nations.

In this context, it is interesting and encouraging to read in the new S.C 2010: "NATO members will always assist each other against attack. … NATO will deter and defend against any threat of aggression and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security of individual allies or the Alliance as a whole."

This is clearly an increment and a widening of the previous interpretation. Beyond borders and territories of allied nations it comprises the protection of their population and their vital interests. Thus, it is not surprising that NATO "will ensure the full range of capabilities necessary to achieve that goal". While missile defence and CBRN defence have a closer relation to the classical conventional/nuclear defence, the additional elements of defence against cyber attacks and international terrorism as well as the necessary contribution to energy security and the continuous analysis of the security impact of emerging technologies open a vast new range of areas of reflection, deliberation, decisions and actions for the Alliance.

It remains to be seen whether all 28 nations will follow that path by engaging in developing concepts, doctrines and, of course, the required capabilities. NATO has experienced the difference between signing an S.C. (or a functional commitment) and the limited will and resolve when it comes to move forward with the required practical steps. Budget limitations are only one, although a critical factor for slow, partial or no delivery at all of the capabilities commit-ted to "in principle" through the initial documents.

Another aspect to be considered in this context is that NATO is emphasised as an organisation providing the essential forum for consultation referring to Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. The S.C. clearly amends that any security issue of interest or concern to any ally can not only be brought to the NATO table for sharing of information and exchange of views. In addition, it underlines clearly that the process can also "forge common approaches".

Whether the new security risks and threats can more successfully be tackled with a conceptual orientation and pragmatic action under collective defence or consultation will depend on the handling of the next severe challenges or attacks against the security interests of the Alliance. While the S.C. 2010 was unanimously agreed upon, one can still recognise slightly different points of view on what situations might fall under article 5. Whoever relates any article 5 case to a classical military response only rather tends to put those new and emerging threats like interruptions of information technology networks into the consultation basket in accordance with article 4. But it seems more appropriate to concentrate on the potential damage and disruption of a country's infrastructure and economic and social fabric through those attacks. Without firing a single bullet the consequences of such an attack can be more significant and severe than an incursion by regular armed forces. It seems questionable whether under such circumstances consultations are sufficient to initiate effective common actions – which in this case might be non-military with military assets in a supporting role.

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Since the new threats are considered in the S.C. 2010 under the defence and deterrence headline, nations will have to credibly show and even prove (through NATO's new Defence Planning Process), that they are preparing the versatile capabilities and complex procedures (Para 40, Lisbon Summit declaration) to defend successfully against those new and very different threats – if and when deterrence or prevention fail.

Missile Defence and Nuclear Posture

Both issues played a prominent role in the discussions prior to the Lisbon Summit and the decision process on the S.C. 2010. An agreement to develop a common missile defence is a strong signal for the indivisible security of all member nations.

The two functionalities have been linked since the development of strategic missiles with nuclear warheads by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In this context we have to remember the negotiations and lengthy debates in preparation of the ABM treaty, leading to the deterrence of MAD (mutual assured destruction). The next phase started with the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) of the Reagan administration. This effort diminished under the subsequent administrations and with the implosion of the Soviet Union.

But missile defence, i.e. strategic ballistic missile defence (SBMD), has remained a concern and a project throughout the subsequent U.S. administrations. The issue also returned to the political forefront in Europe in 2005, when President George W. Bush jun. and the Polish Government began to consider a radar site and/or missile launchers in the Czech Republic and Poland as part of the U.S. National Missile Defence project (NMD). While the U.S. stated that this project was directed against any future launch of strategic missiles from Iran, these activities created an outcry in Russia and objection and scepticism in Western Europe; in particular as it was perceived as hurting the indivisible security of all allies. However, the governments in Prague and Warsaw took it as an American reassurance to their security as a whole.

Reactions turned around when President Obama announced in autumn 2009 that the NMD plans of the Bush years be replaced by a mobile air and sea based system with limited operational range. Over the past year intense talks and consultations paved the way to incorporate a NATO missile defence system as a common project into the S.C. 2010 and to offer in parallel cooperative solutions for and with Russia. The latter point was confirmed with President Medvedjev at the NATO-Russia Council in Lisbon.

The summit declaration covers these challenges in paragraph 36 - 38. Whether the action plan requested by the June 2011 ministerial meeting will precisely address the required steps to implement this missile defence capability will depend on the contributions of all nations. Apart from a precise and common threat definition there are two other factors that can lead to lengthy debates and could give nations enough latitude to delay the process and the required decisions: Affordability and technical feasibility.

Of course, SBMD has always been closely related to nuclear issues and posture. The S.C. 2010 takes the nuclear issue in two directions, namely disarmament and deterrence. "It commits NATO to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons" – but it reconfirms that until this objective is achieved "NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance". And it continues "…The supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance is provided by the

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strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the U.S." In general but strong terms it expresses the will to maintain an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces, to ensure broadest possible participation of allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces and in C3 (command, control & communication) arrangements. On the disarmament side it emphasises the significance of the NPT regime and the necessity to seek Russian agreement for more transparency, relocation away from NATO countries and reducing the disparity in larger numbers of short-range nuclear weapons.

The Lisbon declaration includes the tasking for an overall defence posture review, with specific focus on the nuclear assets while at the same time underlining the commitment to the NPT process. It will be interesting to follow the discussion, since there are countries eager to argue for the rapid withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from their territory while at the same time having signed the broadest possible participation in stationing. This is an evident example where the concept gave everybody what he was asking for but did not cut through the almost contradictory views of member states.

NATO – EU Partnership – Complementarily and Cooperation

The issue of the European pillar within NATO on the one hand and the development of a security policy and military crisis response capability of the EU on the other reaches back into the 70s within the Alliance and into the early 90s in the EU. The 1996 Berlin Plus agreements with WEU, the 1999 Strategic Concept of NATO and the Helsinki Headline Goal of 1999 mark critical points in the development. There were many suspicions and rivalries alongside all official declarations of close, even strategic cooperation. While the Bush Administration started to fully support the ESDP approach late in 2007 and 2008 there was - and still continues to be - the blockade between the Europeans themselves. The European Nations in the EU and NATO – of which 21 are members in both organisations – are not making progress in sol-ving the Cyprus conflict. This unresolved situation practically results in a total impasse on both sides – in the EU by Greece and Greek Cyprus, in NATO by Turkey.

Against this background one has to quote from the S.C. 2010. "The EU is a unique and essential partner for NATO. NATO and the EU can and should play complementary and mutually reinforcing roles in supporting international peace and security." However, the repetition of nice statements and quotations such as strategic partnership, practical cooperation in operations from coordinated planning to mutual support in the field, broad and deep consultations on all issues of common concern and not the least "cooperate more fully in capability development" is not suited to improve the situation. Both organisations should tackle the Cyprus issue more resolutely. It is not sufficient to expect from the UN to solve the problem, nor to blame Turkey for not recognising Greek Cyprus as a full EU member, nor the Greek side of not coming forward to work positively on the 2004 proposal they voted down while the Turkish population in North Cyprus had accepted it. 26 nations in the Alliance and 25 member states in the EU are requested to create innovative approaches. The least would be to decouple the important security and defence policy issues from being taken hostage by this unresolved issue. The NATO summit declaration in Lisbon refers to recent initiatives of some allies and new ideas of SecGen Rasmussen. But there does not seem to be much optimism for accomplishments, since the nations are asking Rasmussen to just give a report on the "ongoing efforts" at the April meeting.

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The minimised proposal to accept

a) The membership of Turkey in the European Defence Agency and
b) Negotiate a security agreement between NATO & Cyprus to reopen the road on crisis management cooperation

is obviously still pending. To wrap up: nothing new under the sun. The necessary compact for comprehensive, more common security policy joining of NATO, the EU and the U.S. will have to keep waiting further. As a result, the objective of more global tackling of emerging, complex security challenges is threatened by a severe setback.

NATO – Russia Relations

One of the difficult issues to build and find consensus in the S.C. 2010 has been and continues to remain the challenge about how and what kind of relationship should be developed, maintained and strengthened with Russia. Since the early 1990s dealing with Russia has had its ups and downs. Of course, Russia, a member of the OSCE, was part of the 1990 vision at the Paris summit of "a Europe whole, free and at peace". But the political and military crisis in the Western Balkans, Moldova and the Caucasus, to name just a few, gave reason to controversies, even interruptions of consultation, coordination or cooperation on security policy issues. But on the other hand, with the "founding act" in 1997 and with the "Rome declaration" in 2002 the interest in and even a commitment towards closer NATO-Russia relations was agreed upon by both sides.

Today, eight years later and more than two years after the Russian war against Georgia the S.C. 2010 repeats that "NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance … we want to see a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia…" This high aspiration is confronted with the obvious differences on issues in Moldova, the South Caucasus, Kosovo, but also the Russian suspicion regarding the missile defence issue, the competing views of the energy supply flow and, last but not least, the worries in the West over Russia's domestic policy situation. Thus, it is obvious that tremendous efforts on both sides will be required to close the gap between the agreed goal and the rough road with many political obstacles. Therefore, as a first step, it will be necessary to identify areas of common interest in security political issues where coordination and even cooperation can help to build trust and confidence. Besides the international efforts towards Iran and in Afghanistan, the NATO Missile Defence Project, advances in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, finalisation of the treaty on conventional force reduction in Europe, but also combating terrorism and activities against piracy around the Gulf of Aden and the ocean facing the coast of Somalia offer opportunities to consolidate progress in NATO-Russia relations. But any positive relationship also requires frank and clear statements about where NATO and its member states are insisting on change or adaptation of Russian positions and attitudes - similar to Russia's never being modest in addressing its disagreement, sometimes even anger, over Alliance policies.

While the discussion about early membership of countries like Ukraine and Georgia has calmed down, the S.C. 2010's clear commitment to an open door towards all European countries bears significant potential for harsh conflicts with the Russian government. A realistic approach towards the building of better cooperation with the Russian Federation will have to consider hard work, clear rational and realistic assessments of the respective interests, goals

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and capabilities to stay on course and the acceptance of smaller or larger setbacks or even backlashes.

Crisis Management and Cooperation among Partners

Same as the core task of defence and deterrence the scope and perspective of crisis management and cooperation, which already featured very prominently in the S.C. 1999, have been broadened in the S.C. 2010. At the same time there is a prioritisation and limitation of when and where to engage.

The "robust set of political and military capabilities" might be employed in an appropriate mix only in a developing crisis with the potential to affect the Alliance's security or in a conflict that affects Alliance security. This qualifies the case-by-case rule from S.C. 1999 and the "as and where required" formulation after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001 in the U.S. The S.C. 2010 makes a clear commitment for engagement throughout the crisis spectrum [before, during and after], assigns tasks and requires standards on intelligence, doctrine and military capabilities, integrated civilian-military planning, training and development of local security forces, training of civilian specialists for rapid deployment and the formation of a "modest civilian crisis management capability".

A closer look at the summit declaration shows some additional military capability requirements. They repeat the commitment towards more deployable, sustainable and interoperable and thus, more effective forces. The wording is eye opening. One paragraph states the "most pressing capability needs" to be followed immediately by a statement that "critical capabilities are (to be) delivered within agreed budgetary ceilings". In light of the very limited results of all previous capability initiatives in NATO (and the EU) there remain doubts whether under the present economically stressed circumstances, including the political pressure to reduce public spending deficits, the generation of capabilities will be more timely and of the necessary quality

- to counter IED,
- to improve collective logistics and medical support,
- to expand the TBMD and defence against cyber attacks,
- to acquire IT systems for improved C2 and effective decision-making
- to ensure arrangements for intelligence sharing.

Many of those elements should have been available across the board even before the current operations, especially for ISAF troops in Afghanistan. While this entices a more sceptical view, the third core task of "cooperative security" that concentrates on partner cooperation in a very broad sense, can present some promising perspectives. Conceptually, partnership policies concentrate on building and strengthening cooperative groupings that can be valid and useful in two ways.

On the one hand, one might be able to reduce and mitigate the crisis and conflict potential based on the assumption that one can positively engage states in potential crisis regions. In this case the focus is on crisis prevention. On the other hand, a broader, more stable basis from which to face and act in "non-cooperative situations" or open conflicts - including highly welcome troop contributions to NATO-led crisis management operations - is generated

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through successful engagement and cooperation with partners and the acceptance of common values, interests and doctrines.

Against this background one should understand the principles expressed in the S.C. 2010 and the enumeration of the very different constellations of partner nations and groupings. While NATO wants to preserve and develop already existing partnership patterns like EAPC, MD and ICI there is an obvious opening to partnerships on a more global scale. Obviously, this refers to the nations that have contributed to the ISAF operation. Under NATO command they have continued what they had already started in the framework of the U.S.-led operation "ENDURING FREEDOM". Thus, one task will be to build a partnership beyond ISAF with countries like Australia, New Zealand and Japan. But the outreach might go further and include closer relations of NATO e.g. with China. These relationships will have a more individual character than those under the partnership for peace program. They will be based on reciprocity, mutual benefit and mutual respect, to also include more constructive coordination and cooperation with the UN, other international organisations as well as important NGOs.

If all these ideas, tasks and perspectives are to be underpinned by practical military cooperation beyond consultations at the NATO HQ level some doubts may rise with regard to the efficiency of the highly commended decision for an even more reduced NATO command structure (NCS). In the words of SecGen Rasmussen it will be "leaner, more efficient and more affordable". Budget constraints seem to be the driving factor. Since the 1990s any "reform "of the NCS first and foremost followed the request of nations: "do more with less".

Outlook

The process and the method that led to the unanimous acceptance of the new S.C. 2010 contributed strongly to a recognisable re-engagement and re-commitment of the member nations. One could also agree that the accomplishment of the work at the Lisbon summit became an act of self-assurance in uncertain and complex times with a tendency of re-nationalising security policy. And this is good news.

But a closer look at the areas discussed above clearly shows that the difficult part is now to come. With the numerous and partly far reaching tasks the nations have given themselves (and moreover, their reduced military command structure) in the Lisbon summit declaration they have to keep or create the momentum to "turn the Lisbon agenda into action".

The NATO engagement in Afghanistan, which is not explicitly referred to in the S.C. 2010, will be one of the first examples to provide proof whether the commitments of the summit decision will be implemented as a truly common mission.

One small but important example demonstrating the difference between agreed language and political action at home relates to the transition of security tasks to the Afghan Government. In paragraph 4 of the declaration it reads: "Transition will be conditions-based, not calendar-driven, and will not equate to withdrawal of ISAF troops". And the document signed by all 48 troop contributing nations continues: "As transition proceeds, we will adjust our profile and configuration, reinvesting some of the transition dividend …. to meet critical security, training and mentoring requirements".

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This very reasonable concept does not fit with the domestic discussions in many countries. The issue is not reinvesting troops and other assets e.g. in the still difficult South and East, the proposal for and the request by national policy makers concentrates on early withdrawals of (combat) troops. This will create growing tension regarding solidarity, burden sharing and effectiveness of the mission. The basic rule for crisis response operations "in together – out together" will be hard to sustain in light of the pressure of public opinion "to get our boys home". As transition in certain provinces and/or districts will begin many will rather reduce their military footprint than shift units to the even increased training and mentoring task or to regions with continued high security challenges.

This is just the earliest example to check whether the self-assurance, re-engagement and determination presented with the S.C. 2010 will stand the test of rough realities both in the theatre of operations and in the NATO member nations.

The author is realistically optimistic that the Alliance can and will stand the test. The S.C. 2010 describes, for the first time, NATO in the era of globalisation. An Alliance that disposes of modernised, deployable and sustainable military capabilities, that operates – in principle – without geographical boundaries, that cooperates with partner countries around the globe (willing and ready for it), that engages and is networking in a completely new way with civil actors of the international community. An Alliance that can achieve these goals can effectively contribute to a more secure, more stable – and more peaceful world. Such an Alliance will have a very full calendar for the next ten years and can gain respect and influence beyond its borders based on its overarching goals combined with pragmatic realism.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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