

# Does NATO matter for US defence policy?

**Daniel Keohane**

»» NATO leaders meet for a summit in Chicago on May 20-21, where they will discuss Afghanistan, missile defence and 'smart defence' – a plan to encourage allies to work more closely on military capabilities. These are important subjects, but there is a bigger strategic question overshadowing NATO's future that the summitters should not avoid: does NATO matter for US defence policy?

The Pentagon published a 'Strategic Guidance' in January 2012, which said that US forces in Asia should be increased while those in Europe should be reduced. Many Europeans worry that the US is starting a process of disengagement from European security, seduced by growing Asian economies and fed up with European military impotence. NATO's successful Libya intervention last year does not re-assure them, because the US chose to 'lead from behind'. The next time Europe faces a major security crisis, so the argument runs, the US may neither lead nor be behind. But nervous Europeans should not worry. The US is not leaving Europe. NATO, however, needs to adapt to a changing world.

## NATO DOES MATTER FOR US DEFENCE POLICY

Despite its success in Libya last year, NATO is increasingly criticised in the United States. Obama's first Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, warned in his 2011 farewell speech that 'if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders...may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost'.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The renewed focus of US defence policy towards Asia does not endanger the future of NATO.
- Although it will not respond to every crisis in and around Europe, the US is not disengaging from European security.
- Europeans need to think harder about their collective security interests and willingness to use force.

»»»»» The figures are sobering. According to NATO data, the US spent a whopping \$785 billion on defence in 2010, accounting for around 75 per cent of NATO defence spending (up from 60 per cent in 1990). Furthermore, while NATO-Europe spent some \$275 billion in 2010, collectively Europeans can barely deploy and sustain 100,000 soldiers for external operations; in contrast the US has a deployable capacity of around 400,000 troops (plus vast numbers of so-called 'strategic assets' and other technologies that Europeans lack, such as long-range transport planes and ships, air tankers, precision-guided-munitions etc.).

The Pentagon will have to cut its budget by some \$489 billion over the next ten years. But the ratio with NATO-Europe will likely remain very lopsided for the foreseeable future, since most European defence ministries also have to cut their budgets in the coming years (in real terms SIPRI says budgets will go down 7.5 per cent in Britain by 2014/2015 and 10 per cent in Germany by 2015; France will remain roughly constant until 2013).

But aside from transatlantic debates on budgets, capabilities and operations, what is the geopolitical value of NATO? The Atlantic Alliance is clearly (in)valuable for Europe. It is arguably the main reason that most Europeans do not perceive a direct military threat to their territories, a rather fortunate position in today's world. Why would Europeans, therefore, wish to give up the guaranteed protection of the American conventional and nuclear deterrents?

However, does NATO matter for US defence policy? Some Americans argue that surely the rich Europeans are capable enough to look after their own security problems, rather than always relying on the United States to do the heavy lifting. Plus, they do not add much to the Pentagon's considerable firepower, and American wars should not be fought by multinational committees.

These are fair criticisms of NATO's deficiencies (which are almost exclusively European). But they miss the strategic point that NATO continues to matter for the US, for three reasons. First, the

security and prosperity of Europe is a vital interest for the United States. The transatlantic economy, for example, accounts for half of global GDP and nearly a third of global trade. Stratfor's Robert D. Kaplan argues that 'those who casually belittle NATO assume that Europe will face no geopolitical nightmares in its future. But that assumption might be wrong...A more dynamic Russia, a more chaotic North Africa and continued unrest and underdevelopment in the Balkans might all pose challenges to Europe'.

Second, NATO helps ensure that Russia is more a nuisance than a direct military threat to most of Europe (and by extension to the United States). While the Atlantic Alliance did not prevent the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, Moscow has 'only' used non-military methods against European members of NATO (such as cyber-attacks against Estonia).

Third, the broader Middle East is and will remain a key region for US interests (think Israel, Iran or energy supplies). The Pentagon's 'Strategic Guidance' says 'our defense efforts in the Middle East will be aimed at countering violent extremists and destabilizing threats...*To support these objectives, the United States will continue to place a premium on U.S. and allied military presence in – and support of – partner nations in and around this region.*' Europe's proximity to the Middle East lends it geo-strategic value for American power projection. For example, the majority of US troops sent to Iraq and Afghanistan travelled via Ramstein airbase in Germany.

As Robert D. Kaplan has summarised: 'NATO is American hegemony on the cheap...NATO is not great, but for the time being it is good enough'.

### **THE PIVOT TO ASIA: MORE CONTINUITY THAN RUPTURE**

The Pentagon's 'Strategic Guidance' says that 'while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region*'. This revised posture

is not as new as it seems. After a decade of fighting a war on terror, and weary from the Afghan and Iraqi campaigns, in some respects the Obama administration is reverting to a similar strategic stance advocated by George W. Bush before the 2001 terrorist attacks - going back to the future of US defence policy by re-affirming American leadership.

The 'Strategic Guidance' outlines a sense of continuity of geographic priorities, contingency-planning

## Europeans should stop worrying about US disengagement from Europe, and think harder about their engagement with the world

and future shape of US armed forces. On geography US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, has explained that 'we will enhance our presence in Asia Pacific and the Middle East, where we see the greatest challenges and the greatest opportunities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century...we will maintain a robust presence in Europe'. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* during the 2000 presidential campaign, future

Bush Administration National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, outlined a similar list of geographic priorities: 'to meet decisively the emergence of any hostile military power in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Europe.'

For contingency planning, the Obama administration has revised the so-called 'two-war' posture - the ability to conduct two major wars at the same time - but maintaining the capacity and flexibility to cope with more than one contingency. In June 2001, the then-defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, told the US Congress: 'an approach that prepares for two major wars, by its very nature, focuses military planning on the near-term, to the detriment of preparing for longer-term threats'. On the future

shape of the US Armed Forces, Panetta says that 'the United States military will be smaller and we will be leaner... a cutting edge force for the future'. Condoleezza Rice told the *New York Times* in 2000 that she favoured 'perhaps skipping a generation' of weapons technology to build armed forces that are 'lighter and more lethal'.

The main difference between 2001 and 2012 is that the global power structure has changed. Economic prowess is shifting from West to East, and this is starting to translate into a shift in global military power. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, Asian defence spending in 2012 will exceed European military expenditure for the first time. China's defence budget is expected to surpass NATO-Europe spending by 2020. It is hardly surprising that Asia - especially East Asia - should increasingly occupy the minds of American strategists.

However, American interest in Asian security is not new. The US has been an Asian power since its intervention in the Philippines in 1898; fought a trans-Pacific war during World War II; followed by wars in Korea and Vietnam. In 2011, the US had 55,000 soldiers stationed in East Asia, mainly in Japan and South Korea, compared with some 80,000 in Europe (there were more than 200,000 deployed in the broader Middle East, including Iraq and Afghanistan). There is room, therefore, for some re-adjustment; particularly since East Asia has more potential high-intensity hotspots than Europe (consider Taiwan, South China Sea and North Korea amongst others). Plus it is in Europe's interest that the American presence helps ensure open sea-lanes in East Asia, for 28 per cent of EU external trade is with that region.

### THE US IS NOT ABANDONING EUROPE

At the annual Munich Security Conference (a kind of Davos for security buffs) in February 2012, both US Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of



»»»»» Defence Panetta were at pains to stress that NATO allies remain the first-choice partners for the US. Panetta added that ‘for Europe, the U.S. defense strategy reaffirms the lasting strategic importance of the transatlantic partnership with the United States. Although it will evolve in light of strategic guidance and the resulting budget decisions, our military footprint in Europe will remain larger than in any other region in the world’.

Whether Europeans are comforted by these American re-assurances remains to be seen. Carnegie Europe Director, Jan Techau, wrote in March 2012 that ‘NATO is in crisis because the European security market now runs a very real risk of losing its most important purveyor of military power: the United States’. Francois Heisbourg from the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique in Paris has written in a recent CER report that ‘if war were to break out in Europe in the future, the US may well decide that it does not have a “dog in this fight”’. British Defence Minister Philip Hammond said Europe must react in ‘a mature way, not a histrionic way’ to the US shift but Americans needed ‘to reassure Europe that you are not going away’.

None of these assessments of the new US defence strategy seem exactly right. President Obama plans to reduce European numbers by only 15 per cent to 68,000 (it is not yet fully clear how much the East Asian number will rise). The US will almost certainly continue to cut its European numbers and increase its presence in Asia in the coming decade. However, this re-balancing of troop deployments matches the post-Cold War US posture before 2001. During most of the Clinton administration for instance, the US had 100,000 troops stationed in East Asia, the same amount that was in Europe. The reorganisation of American military resources will happen over many years, and its evolution will depend on future events. True, the Pentagon will not be interested in responding to every crisis in and around Europe; for example, it did not hide its reluctance to intervene in Libya. But the Obama administration is not leaving Europe, and re-balancing should not be confused with abandoning.

## **ADAPTING NATO**

Even though NATO remains geo-politically important for the United States, the alliance faces a confusing future because of European deficiencies. Defence policy is not very high on the European political agenda, since most voters do not think it is more important than the economy, the environment or migration. This is partly because most Europeans do not perceive a direct military threat to their own territory – which is after all the *raison d’être* of defence policy – and they are drained from the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. But it is also because European defence ministers struggle to answer the question: what is the role of armed forces in today’s rapidly changing world?

While Asian countries are fast catching up, collectively NATO-Europe still spends more on defence than any other player bar the United States, so the issue is how that money should be spent, not how much is spent. In other words, the real problem facing NATO is that European governments do not agree on how or when armed force should be used. Roughly, the 26 European members of NATO can be split into three groups: activists, defenders and free-riders. Activists are prepared to use force abroad; defenders, partly because of austerity, prefer to focus on territorial defence; while free-riders spend little and do less. NATO’s recent Libya operation is a case and point: only six European countries (all from Western Europe) deployed fighter jets to bomb ground targets.

In contrast to US defence policy, European defence planning is almost exclusively focused on Europe’s neighbourhood. Put simply, the US is an Asian power, but the Europeans are not. This is not new. During the Cold war, France and Britain carried out a military operation in the Suez Canal, but they did not join the Americans in Vietnam. Indeed, future historians may conclude that Afghanistan was the exception that proved this post-World War II rule. Most Europeans went to Afghanistan for the sake of their close relationship with the United States, not because they felt it was an existential

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threat to their security. That unhappy experience makes it very unlikely that Europeans would follow Americans on future military operations beyond Europe's neighbourhood.

The key question, consequently, is how will Europeans cope with problems in their neighbourhood – with or without the US? Herein lays the potential for trouble. Sometimes the US may wish to take the lead, with or without Europeans (think Yemen or Bahrain). Sometimes, the US may get involved with Europeans (think Egypt, Libya or Iran). But sometimes Europeans may have to act without the US. The UN force sent to the Israeli-Lebanese border in 2006 was primarily made up of Europeans; and although they didn't use military force, it was the EU-27 that led the international response to the Georgia crisis in 2008.

The core of this question is whether Europeans would use robust military force alone. At first glance this seems unlikely, based on past evidence and their lack of capabilities. But then, little over a year ago the idea of France and Britain leading a military operation in Libya also seemed fanciful. While the US is not leaving Europe, given the Pentagon's recent reluctance over Libya and Georgia, Washington would surely be happy to leave most future Balkan, Caucasian and North African crises to the Europeans. The US, after all, has enough to worry about in the broader Middle East and Asia.

In other words, the transatlantic bargain should contain three parts: NATO should continue to guarantee territorial defence; the EU should take the lead for external operations in Europe's neighbourhood where the US has no interest; and NATO would only act beyond Europe's borders when the US wished to be involved.

## CONCLUSION

The world is changing and US strategy is adapting accordingly. Europeans should not fear the renewed American focus on Asian security.

True, Europeans will increasingly have to cope with some crises on their own. This will require Europeans to think much harder about their collective interests and willingness to use force. If they do not, transatlantic security cooperation could face a troubled future. But European security remains important for the United States, as does Europe's proximity to the Middle East. NATO, therefore, will continue to matter for US defence policy. Europeans should stop worrying about US disengagement from Europe, and think harder about their engagement with the world.

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