

11 January 2012

## Needed Reform - The Case of NATO

NATO's attempts at re-legitimizing itself to better respond to the challenges of the contemporary international system remain a controversial subject. Prevailing global economic conditions are adding a new dimension to debates regarding the future shape of the alliance.

Prepared by: [ISN staff](#)

Yesterday we looked at how a changing international system is putting increasing strains on [international organizations \(IOs\)](#). Our analysis was, in part, a realist one – i.e., two of the texts we examined not only argued that IOs continue to reflect the balance of power that exists in the world today, but that some of these entities have become demonstrably brittle in the face of new challenges to their traditional *modus operandi*. There are more than a few critics who argue that the current structure and objectives of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) demonstrate the latter problem in spades. The organization's defenders, of course, argue the opposite. They claim that NATO and the term 'in crisis' have always been synonymous with each other, and that the Alliance has had to reinvent itself before, most notably after the end of the Cold War. Indeed, while some Western analysts ushered in the 1990s by proclaiming it as 'The End of History', NATO's supporters note that it embarked on a transformational process that remains very much a work-in-progress.

As part of this transformation, an alliance that had previously conducted few actual operations now not only did so, but increasingly did so in areas beyond the Euro-Atlantic heartland. Yet, far from illustrating how a transnational organization can function far afield without clear mission statements, NATO's involvement in the Former Yugoslav Republic, Afghanistan, and more recently Libya, merely showcases some of the organization's current adaptation problems. To explore this problem in greater detail today, let's first consider Andrew T. Wolff's *The Structural and Political Crisis of NATO Transformation* and then briefly analyze Christian Mölling's [Europe Without Defence](#).

### **NATO's Post-Cold War Transformation**

Beginning in the early 1990s, NATO gamely sought to reflect the evolving realities of a post-Cold War international system by changing its ideology and practices.

1. It expanded its territory and membership, specifically into Central and Eastern Europe.
2. It attempted to reinvent itself as a global protector of democratic norms, which meant it now stressed Article 4 of its charter rather than the more familiar Article 5.
3. It practiced threat inflation – i.e., the Alliance eventually claimed that a multitude of new threats

had emerged and that their complexity outstripped “the relatively simple dynamics of maintaining credible military forces along the old Iron Curtain.” Accordingly, NATO added the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, drug trafficking and the threat posed by failed states to its list of central security concerns.

These adjustments (and others) seem praiseworthy on the surface, but did they reflect a transnational organization effectively adapting itself to changing times, or did the adaptation itself – i.e., the ambitious attempt to balance both traditional and more novel objectives – result in new stresses rather than not? Wolff argues that the stresses on NATO actually multiplied, which illustrates that either/or thinking – either you reinvent yourself or you decline – is too tidy or simpleminded here.

Instead, let’s take the obvious case of NATO’s territorial expansion eastwards. While the threat posed by the Warsaw Pact had long since dissipated, the ready assimilation of the Baltic States and most of Central and Eastern Europe into a growing post-modern Kantian peace space had the effect of – surprise! – setting a suzerainty-minded Russia on edge. As a result, Boris Yeltsin – in an early attempt to overcome this encroachment by a Western ‘other’ on Russia’s near abroad – called for NATO to be superseded by a new collective security mechanism that included all the countries of greater Europe, including Russia. This proposal failed, or at least has failed so far, but tensions have evolved and remain over issues such as NATO’s interest in building a [missile defense shield](#) abutting Russia’s ‘sphere of interest’. So, as a result of updating its remit and broadening its territorial reach, an alliance which convinced itself it was merely becoming more responsive to changing circumstances actually created new sources of insecurity for itself by antagonizing the likes of Russia.

We can also extend this train of thought to NATO’s resolve to assist in the promotion of democratic values. To pursue this worthy goal, beginning in the 1990s the Alliance, among other things, enhanced its diplomatic ties, exchanged best practices and personnel, and initiated a strategic dialogue with Central and Eastern European countries. NATO further promoted its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in order to foster democratic values in some 37 countries. Once again, though, Wolff will have none of it. In his view, new initiatives lead to added organizational complexity, and this complexity is the root cause of many difficulties now being experienced by the Alliance. As Wolff notes: “There is evidence to indicate the different spheres of responsibility – security guarantor, democracy promoter, and global interventionist – are coming into conflict with one another. These conflicts appear in the form of mismatches between organizational strategy and policy implementation. Action in one sphere of the Alliance’s responsibility denigrates progress in another sphere and vice versa.”

In Afghanistan, for example, NATO has acted as a military force, has promoted democratic values, but it has also provided humanitarian aid. As a result, many humanitarian-minded agencies have complained that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between aid workers and soldiers. This lack of distinction, in turn, compromises the neutrality and independence of the aid agencies, or so their representatives claim. Wolff further argues that NATO’s ambiguous role in Afghanistan “has [had] negative effects on broader reconstruction efforts conducted by NGOs and the UN, which ultimately hampers the Alliance’s original intention of improving conditions in Afghanistan.” (Further tensions have also arisen as a result of NATO’s attempts to combat socio-economic problems such as corruption, a task for which it is arguably ill-equipped.)

Alongside NATO’s seemingly contradictory set of core objectives are concerns that certain member-states are inadequately trained and equipped to fulfill NATO’s contemporary remit. Indeed, there are a number of factors that explain this capability gap. First, there appears to be a notable lack of support from some member-states for NATO’s increasingly adventurous initiatives. For states such as Germany, deploying troops overseas is problematic for historical reasons. And while Germany has made contributions to NATO operations in Afghanistan, we know it has primarily focused upon the

provision of logistics and equipment, rather than sending troops into combat.

The issue of chronic underfunding (particularly in Europe) of member-states' armed forces also remains a major concern. All NATO member-states have agreed to allocate a minimum of 2% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense expenditure. It is (and has been) widely expected that a 2% allocation will maintain defense-industrial capacity, capabilities and an acceptable level of burden-sharing across the alliance. Yet since the end of the Cold War most European member-states have decreased defense expenditures. And as governments come under increasing pressure to reduce [massive debt burdens](#), defense expenditure is likely to decline even further.

To complement Wolff's concerns, Christian Mölling of the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP) warns in *Europe without Defence* that the defense capabilities of many European (and by default NATO members) states will decline in three waves unless governments coordinate their spending cuts and defense planning. In the first wave, 27 'bonsai armies' will be created in Europe over the next five years. According to Mölling, the second wave will see, over five to ten years from now, major global defense industrial actors leaving Europe. So with the arrival of a third wave in 10 to 20 years, Europe will have fallen behind other regions as a hub for military research and technology. If Mölling's prophesy is fulfilled, not only will NATO's European partners spend increasingly less on defense, it is also plausible that there will be increased reluctance to contribute to NATO's global activities.

## Conclusion

NATO's attempts at re-legitimizing itself for the post-Cold War international system continue to encounter problems. The alliance's broadening of both its membership and mission has, for example, aggravated traditional geopolitical rivalries. Not only are certain member-states' armed forces incapable of fulfilling aspects of NATO's new core objectives, others remain reluctant to provide adequate levels of expenditure to ensure that the alliance is 'fit for purpose'. Indeed, the global economic crisis may signal the end of NATO's attempts to reinvent itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For many European member-states, it may be a case that there is simply not enough money to lavish upon overseas operations. So Mölling's "27 bonsai armies" is by no means the stuff of myth. Without coordinated efforts to minimize the impact of reduced defense expenditure Western Europe – and almost by default NATO – may cease to be a major defense and security provider. Ambitions regarding the promotion of democracy and global interventionism seem almost superfluous in this context. Maybe it is time to limit the scope of NATO and prioritize integration and consolidation over listening to the siren song of 'adapting' to new circumstances.

## Resources

### Partner Content

[Libyan Operations: A Defence Perspective](#) , Stuart Atha, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2011

[NATO Reform and Decision-Making](#) , Edgar Buckley, Kurt Volker, Atlantic Council of the United States, 2010

[Shaping NATO's Reform Agenda](#) , Jonathan Dowdall, Security Defence Agenda (SDA), 2011

[STRATCON 2010: An Alliance for a Global Century](#) , Julian Lindley-French, Yves Boyer, Atlantic Council of the United States, 2011

[The Absence of Europe: Implications for International Security?](#) Steven Philip Kramer, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), 2008

[Europe without Defence](#), Christian Mölling, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2011

[Come Home NATO?](#) Jens Ringsmose, Sten Rynning, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 2009

[EU-NATO Partnership and Its Prospects](#), Marcin Terlikowski, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 2010

[NATO's Defense and Deterrence and Posture Review](#), Paul Zajac, British American Security Information Council (BASIC), 2011

### **Additional Reading**

'The structural and political crisis of NATO transformation', Andrew T. Wolff, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2009

Editor's note:

For the rest of our content on "Transnational Institutions and Organizations: Required Adjustments and New Opportunities for Change," check out our [dossier](#) on the topic.

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

---

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=135868>

---

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland