

NATO Interoperability: Sustaining Trust and Capacity within the Alliance

by Stephen J. Maranian¹



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Interoperability: “A measure of the degree to which various organizations or individuals are able to operate together to achieve a common goal.”²

The North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) is at a pivotal point in its history. The Alliance currently faces the most complex geopolitical period in its existence. External threats are exacerbated by waning internal cohesion resulting in part from the period of the Alliance's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and the United States' 'pivot' to the Pacific.

This paper proffers that interoperability provides a vehicle for enhancing trust and cooperation within NATO while simultaneously mending fences in order to keep the Alliance strong. It begins by describing the strategic context highlighting the importance of interoperability with a focus on the operational and strategic levels. It describes an erosion of trust which has emerged within NATO during the ISAF era while offering recent examples from both ISAF and Libya, which show that despite internal friction, interoperability has emerged as a significant strength of the Alliance. It highlights the corresponding increasing prominence of the concept of interoperability in NATO's recent strategic guidance and public declarations. Finally it provides some suggestions for NATO's way ahead by discussing methods for sustaining and improving interoperability in the areas of its doctrine, organization, training, material, and personnel, reinforcing its recent success.

Strategic Context

From its inception in 1949 until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NATO

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² Myron Hura, et al., “Interoperability, A Continuing Challenge in Coalition Air Operations,” 2000, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1235.html, Chapter 2, (accessed June 6, 2015).



existed for a singular purpose – collective defense. The Washington Treaty³ bound like-minded nations together to effectively deter the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact throughout this 40-year period. The end of the Cold War necessitated an evolution in strategy as NATO came to grips with the reality of enduring as an Alliance in an era where no peer rival threatened it. It responded by opening its doors to new Allies. In the aftermath of the Cold War, NATO recognized that crisis management and cooperative security had joined collective defense as core tasks,⁴ tasks that have taken center stage over the past several years.

For over a decade beginning in August 2003, NATO led the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Combat operations under ISAF ended on December 31, 2014, and NATO's Resolute Support Mission, to advise and assist the Government of Afghanistan, began in its stead.⁵ This historic transition came at a time when NATO faced a great power threat from an increasingly assertive Russia to the east as well as a less traditional threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)⁶ to the south. While the threat posed by ISIL was clearly unforeseen, and one could argue that the threat posed by Russia should have been foreseen, both manifested themselves more significantly nearly simultaneously with NATO's transition in Afghanistan. These challenges, which remain of significance to the Alliance today, are coupled with tough economic realities, which have resulted in significant pressure on defense budgets.

Sustained operations in Afghanistan under the ISAF flag were facilitated by the Alliance's ability to routinely rotate headquarters and forces without degradation in capability. Moreover the ability of NATO and its partners to rapidly organize and conduct combat operations over Libya in 2011 and more recently as

part of a coalition against ISIL in Syria are directly linked to the improved interoperability resulting from the ISAF mission. The Alliance must not let this capability erode.

In the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous⁷ world of today and tomorrow, NATO does not have the luxury to roll back the clock and limit its role solely to that of collective defense as it did during the Cold War. To successfully accomplish the core tasks outlined in its strategic concept, NATO must also continue to respond to extra-territorial crises. This is true both in its immediate neighborhood as well as in its broader area of interest. To do so effectively, NATO must maintain the ability to swiftly react to crises in a multilateral manner with unity of purpose and effort. Interoperability underpins NATO's ability to achieve this end.

The Alliance today finds itself at a strategic inflection point⁸ rivaled in scope only by the one it faced after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. How it responds will determine the course of Transatlantic and European history in the decades to come.

The Importance of Interoperability

Cooperative security is a broad task consisting of numerous elements. "Generally speaking, [it] consists of three components: ...strengthening partnerships, contributing to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament, and assisting potential new countries to prepare for NATO membership."⁹ An important sub-element of both strengthening partnerships and preparing new countries for potential membership is interoperability. In fact, interoperability is not only important for the Alliance as an element of cooperative security, but also as an inherent responsibility of all

³ The North Atlantic Treaty (The Washington Treaty), Washington DC – 4 April 1949.

⁴ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, (Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, 19-20 November 2010), 6-7.

⁵ The NATO Home Page, "ISAF's Mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014)," last updated January 13, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁶ The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is also commonly referred to as the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State in Iraq and as-Shām (ISIS), and Dawlat al-Islāmiyya fi al-Iraq wa s-Shām, abbreviated as "DAESH."

⁷ "The term VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity and originates from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. VUCA describes the new environment, the new context in which leaders must work." George Ambler, "VUCA Leading in Turbulent Times," Helping Leaders Grow, entry posted November 16, 2012, <http://www.georgeambler.com/vuca-leading-in-turbulent-times/> (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁸ Karen Parrish, "Hagel, NATO Defense Ministers Gather at 'Inflection Point'," American Forces Press Service, October 22, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120987> (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁹ The NATO Home Page, "Cooperative Security as NATO's Core Task," last updated September 7, 2011, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_77718.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).



Allies to optimize efficiency and effectiveness when operating in a NATO context. It exists at all levels: tactical, operational, and strategic.

Throughout its history, NATO has focused on tactical interoperability to facilitate the effectiveness of military trainers, logisticians, and administrative personnel. Hundreds of Standardization Agreements (STANAG) define for Alliance members various processes and terms for equipment and for common military and technical procedures. These STANAG provide common operational, logistics, and administrative procedures so any member nation's military can easily use the stores and support structure of another member's military. NATO nations have been training together in formal exercises since 1951. "Holding frequent exercises that test many different capabilities helps forces operate more effectively and efficiently together in crisis situations."¹⁰ Perhaps the most significant historical example of training together to facilitate fighting together was Exercise Reforger,¹¹ held nearly annually from 1969-1993. This significant exercise rehearsed reinforcement of forces in Europe by large formations from North America, and integration of all forces to achieve a common objective. While interoperability was not the paramount objective of Exercise Reforger, it certainly was a supporting effort.

Operationally, NATO nations continue to train and operate together and with partners extensively. Alliance interoperability has greatly improved during the 11 years of the ISAF era. This is evident in the levels of complexity and multinational integration exhibited during Mission Rehearsal Exercises and other training

rotations at the United States' Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany.¹² Indeed "NATO interoperability is the *'gold-standard'* for working together" in the world today.¹³ An operational example of improvements during the ISAF era is the Coalition Interoperability Assurance & Validation (CIAV) initiative of the ISAF Joint Command (IJC). The CIAV addressed information and data sharing shortfalls to "increase the exchange of critical... warfighting information and improve overall interoperability allowing coalition forces to fight more effectively and efficiently."¹⁴

Strategically, interoperability has both internal and external elements. Internally, initiatives such as smart defence and the connected forces initiative (CFI) highlight the renewed importance placed on interoperability in recent years. Allied Command Transformation (ACT) spearheads several initiatives designed to transform NATO's military structure, forces, capabilities and doctrine. One of its main responsibilities is promoting interoperability throughout the Alliance.¹⁵ NATO's significant focus in this area has given wings to additional initiatives such as the framework nation initiative, already being employed in some areas and being considered for implementation in others.

Externally, interoperability includes several longstanding partnership programs. Most prominent among them are the Partnership for Peace (PfP),¹⁶ Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI),¹⁷ and Mediterranean Dialogue (MD);¹⁸ however, there are also newer initiatives such as the Partnership Interoperability Initiative

¹⁰ The NATO Home Page, "Exercises," last updated June 3, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49285.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed June 6, 2015).

¹¹ Exercise Reforger derived its name from the phrase "Return of Forces to Germany."

¹² Joint Multination Training Command (JMTC) Staff, "Rotation and Exercise Briefing," briefing slides, Hohenfels, Germany, United States Joint Multinational Training Command, October 8, 2014.

¹³ Julian Lindley-French, "NATO Forces 2020," presentation to NATO Defense College, Rome, Italy, October 28, 2014, cited with permission.

¹⁴ The Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association Homepage, "Coalition Interoperability Assurance & Validation; Information Exchange Forum," briefing slides, Tampa, Florida, August 23, 2011, http://www.afcea.org/events/pastevents/documents/LWN11_AIC_CIAV_Activities_in_Afghanistan.pdf (accessed June 6, 2015).

¹⁵ The NATO Home Page, "Allied Command Transformation," last updated November 11, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52092.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).

¹⁶ "The Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between individual Euro-Atlantic partner countries and NATO. It allows partners to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation." The NATO Home Page, "The Partnership for Peace Programme," last updated March 31, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50349.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).

¹⁷ "NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched at the Alliance's Summit in June 2004, aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. ICI focuses on practical cooperation in areas where NATO can add value, notably in the security field." The NATO Home Page, "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)," last updated November 18, 2011, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_58787.htm? (accessed June 6, 2015).

¹⁸ "NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue was initiated in 1994 by the North Atlantic Council. It currently involves seven non-NATO countries of the Mediterranean region." The NATO Home Page, "Mediterranean Dialogue," last updated February 13, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_60021.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).



launched at the 2014 Wales Summit. It “aims to maintain and deepen the ability of partner forces to work alongside Allied forces.”¹⁹

A Rift in the Alliance?

The need for Allies and partners to be adept at operating together seamlessly is evident to even a novice student of operational art. Without an understanding of the context and costs of the ISAF mission however, it is not readily apparent why interoperability is so vital to the health of the Alliance today. While all NATO nations contributed to the ISAF mission, several factors resulted in soldiers from a small number of nations doing the bulk of the fighting. Among these factors were: the type of forces contributed (combat arms units vs. support units), the quantity of forces contributed, and national caveats, which limited the utilization of forces. Throughout the ISAF mission, caveats “diminished the Alliance’s overall effectiveness and created resentment within the coalition from countries that [bore] a greater share of the burden as a result.”²⁰ Some countries are seen to have withheld their full effort.²¹

Professor Julian Lindley-French echoed this disparity of effort in Afghanistan during an October 2014 presentation at the NATO Defense College (NDC). He remarked that as NATO forces end their combat mission in Afghanistan, “we as Allies run the risk of coming apart into two groups: the *Anglo-sphere* and *Euro-sphere*.”²² In other words, a rift between the generally English-speaking members of the Alliance that did the bulk of the fighting, and other European

nations who performed predominantly a support role or who operated in lower risk areas of operation. Dr. Lindley-French’s point was a generalization. One does not have a hard time finding examples of the significant contributions and sacrifices made by European Allies. French forces were directly involved in significant combat in Kapisa Province before their withdrawal in 2012. The efforts of Norwegian special operations forces were exceptional throughout the campaign in Afghanistan, as were those of the Danish armed forces who, per capita, paid the greatest cost in casualties among all members of the Alliance.²³ His point, however must be seriously considered, that “if we cannot trust each other to share risk at the point of contact,” then the consequences to NATO will be dire.²⁴

On the other side of the coin, there is a growing feeling among some European members of NATO that they cannot rely on the United States to protect their interests as they once could. America’s ongoing ‘pivot’ to the Pacific has rubbed some members of the Alliance the wrong way. The word ‘pivot’ was poorly chosen, implying that America is turning its back on Europe. While the United States endeavored to minimize the impact of the word by rebranding the pivot as a ‘rebalance’ the damage was done, and the word still resonates in Europe today.²⁵ The United States’ role in Operation Unified Protector (OUP), NATO’s 2011 Libya campaign in support of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973,²⁶ was described in the media as “leading from behind.”²⁷ For those that fear an American retreat from Europe, it served as a wake-up call, highlighting the Alliance’s limitations when the United States does not take a leading role.²⁸

¹⁹ The NATO Home Page, “Partnerships: a cooperative approach to security,” last updated October 16, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84336.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).

²⁰ David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, “NATO at War: Understanding the Challenges of Caveats in Afghanistan,” September 2009, http://www.academia.edu/2854539/NATO_at_War_Understanding_the_Challenges_of_Caveats_in_Afghanistan (accessed June 6, 2015).

²¹ David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, “NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone,” Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2014, pg. 3.

²² Lindley-French, “NATO Forces 2020,” cited with permission.

²³ Guillaume Lasconjarias, NATO Defense College, Research Department, e-mail to author, May 31, 2015.

²⁴ Lindley-French, “NATO Forces 2020,” cited with permission.

²⁵ Harlan Ullman, “Fixing the flaws in the pivot to Asia,” United Press International, November 21, 2012, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2012/11/21/Fixing-the-flaws-in-the-pivot-to-Asia/UPI-60141353474420/ (accessed June 6, 2015).

²⁶ The NATO Home Page, “Operation Unified Protector Final Mission Stats – Fact Sheet,” November 2, 2011, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_11/20111108_111107-factsheet_up_factsfigures_en.pdf (accessed June 6, 2015).

²⁷ The phrase “leading from behind” is often falsely credited to President Obama. The phrase is attributed by a “*New Yorker*” writer to an unnamed presidential advisor who has never been revealed. Regardless, of its origin, politicians and the media have used this phrase to describe the US role in OUP. Ryan Lizza, “Leading from Behind,” April 26, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/leading-from-behind> (accessed June 6, 2015)

²⁸ The Economist, Charlemagne - European politics, “Always waiting for the US cavalry,” June 10, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2011/06/libya-europe-and-future-nato> (accessed June 6, 2015)



If a bifurcation in the Alliance is indeed taking place, then NATO urgently needs to seek ways for Allies to rebuild waning trust. The Transatlantic link must not only remain intact, but the relationship between North American and European members of NATO must continue to be a healthy one. Perhaps the most obvious vehicle for achieving this end is working side-by-side sustaining and further improving interoperability. Aside from nuclear deterrence, which contributes daily to the Alliance's collective defense, interoperability training is perhaps the easiest way for NATO to regularly focus on its core tasks. Training together to achieve interoperability brings Allies closer together and builds--and where necessary, restores--trust and confidence.

Interoperability training doesn't need to be limited to the 28 members of the Alliance. Inclusion of partners in such training serves additional varying purposes. For close and like-minded partners that habitually deploy and fight alongside the Alliance there is a strong practical purpose behind developing interoperability. Likewise for partners whose interests may not always align with those of NATO, but may align for certain missions as part of a coalition of the willing. In such cases, a degree of familiarity with how NATO operates is mutually beneficial. During OUP, nations such as Sweden and Qatar flew missions as part of the coalition. The speed and degree to which partners integrated was directly linked to past interoperability training with NATO and equipment compatibility. Swedish Air Forces integrated rapidly,²⁹ while those of Qatar experienced a little bit of friction at the beginning until they fully implemented NATO standards.³⁰ For less developed partners that endeavor to evolve in a manner compatible with NATO countries' shared beliefs and values, there is also a benefit in training together. Such interaction serves both to nudge these limited partners towards the path of liberal democracy while simultaneously deterring thoughts of aligning against NATO.

Strategic Guidance and a Growing Emphasis on Interoperability

Over the past five years NATO has placed a growing emphasis on interoperability in its strategic guidance and declarations. Besides the Washington Treaty itself, NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept is the Alliance's most relevant source of strategic guidance. NATO's current Strategic Concept is a coherent, straight-forward document that clearly articulates NATO's core tasks and principles. Surprisingly, the 2010 strategic concept does not directly mention interoperability. The themes of working together within the Alliance and partnering outside the Alliance however pervade.³¹

The 2012 Chicago Summit declaration mentions interoperability five times. Four of those references deal with extra-Alliance partnerships: Georgia, Ukraine, MD nations, and a general reference to partners attending the summit. The only reference to interoperability within the Alliance dealt with cyber.³² Nevertheless, NATO's seminal interoperability concept, the CFI was launched in Chicago, following its introduction by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the 2012 Munich Security Conference:

At the 2012 Chicago Summit, NATO adopted the goal of NATO Forces 2020: a coherent set of deployable, interoperable and sustainable forces equipped, trained, exercised and commanded to operate together and with partners in any environment. ... The CFI aims to enhance the high level of interconnectedness and interoperability allied forces have achieved in operations and with partners.³³

Interoperability as a theme weighed much more prominently in the 2014 Wales Summit declaration. The Wales declaration included 16 wide-ranging references to interoperability. It cited operations (Active Endeavor and Ocean Shield), partnerships, both general and specific (Georgia and Ukraine), functional requirements (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and cyber), exercises and training (Trident Juncture), education, smart defense (pooling

²⁹ LtCol Stefan Wilson, Swedish Air Force, quoted in video: "NATO and Libya – Swedish contribution to Operation Unified Protector," Uploaded May 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bFZ5iVZ-dE>, (accessed June 6, 2015).

³⁰ LtGen Mubarak Al-Khayarin, Chief of Qatari Air Component Command, quoted in video: "NATO and Libya – Qatar's contribution to Operation Unified Protector," Uploaded May 5, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9Re_Pwdu10 (accessed June 6, 2015).

³¹ *Active Engagement, Modern Defence*.

³² NATO, *Chicago Summit Declaration*, (Chicago, Illinois, USA, May 20, 2012).

³³ The NATO Home Page, "Connected Forces Initiative," last updated September 16, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_98527.htm (accessed June 6, 2015).

³⁴ NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, (Newport, Wales, September 5, 2014).



and sharing) and CFI.³⁴ The growing emphasis on interoperability reflected a strategy to deal with the crises facing NATO to its east and south, financial limitations, and its internal challenges of solidarity and trust.

Three Crises

Complicating the path towards improving trust and interoperability is the “Euro-zone crisis,” i.e. the difficult financial situation facing the European Union’s (EU) economic and monetary union. This crisis, according to one analyst is the “greatest threat to the EU.”³⁵ Sharing 22 common members, the EU and NATO naturally have an intertwined relationship. Disharmony within the EU therefore will likely result in turbulence within NATO. The economic crisis in Europe and corresponding decline or stagnation of national defense spending both in Europe and America comes at a time when NATO faces multiple crises, and can ill-afford to allow its effectiveness to subside. Complicating matters is the fact that the link between the EU’s strategy for its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and NATO is unclear to many. Indeed, the EU seems reluctant to define its strategy in its governing documents.³⁶ To its great credit, NATO addressed the financial strain facing it in the Wales Summit declaration. Allies agreed that those not currently meeting the 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) target for defense expenditure would “halt any further decline, aim to increase expenditure in real terms as GDP grows, and aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade.”³⁷

To the east, NATO faces a resurgent Russia, which brazenly annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and continues to actively and passively foment unrest in eastern Ukraine. As NATO looks for economic efficiencies by pooling and sharing as part of its smart

defence initiative,³⁸ Russia is significantly increasing its military budget. Russia’s 2015 military budget “rose by 33% to about 3.3 trillion rubles (some \$50 billion).”³⁹ This increase raises Moscow’s military expenditures to 4.2% of Russia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴⁰ Additionally, President Vladimir Putin’s increasingly nationalistic rhetoric has grown more and more assertive as he seeks to strengthen Russia’s position in the multi-polar world of the future. While Russia’s defense expenditures do not come close to matching those of the Alliance,⁴¹ the rate at which its defense budget is growing warrants attention, as does the threat to sovereignty perceived by NATO’s eastern Allies.

Simultaneously, to the south, the emergence and sensational violence of ISIL threatens the fragile stability of the Middle East and North African regions. The rapid march of ISIL across portions of Syria and Iraq to the gates of Baghdad led to the emergence of a “coalition of the willing” organized on the margins of the Wales Summit to deal with the threat. For a number of reasons, both political and economic, the current method of dealing with this crisis does not include a ground combat component. This approach is merely containing, not solving the problem. Dealing with ISIL may likely require a more comprehensive and decisive solution with a significant military component. This is growing more and more urgent as ISIL’s atrocities spread beyond the boundaries of Syria and Iraq.

Refining NATO’s Road Ahead

The strategic inflection point facing NATO provides an opportunity to do some critical analysis of the Alliance’s way forward as it faces these internal and external crises. To that end, this paper provides a few suggestions to optimize NATO’s interoperability and thereby build greater trust within the Alliance.

The 2010 Strategic Concept was written at a time

³⁵ Lindley-French, “NATO Forces 2020,” cited with permission.

³⁶ Jolyon Howorth, E-International Relations, “The December 2013 European Council on Defence: Avoiding Irrelevance,” October 15, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/the-december-2013-european-council-on-defence-avoiding-irrelevance/> (accessed June 6, 2015).

³⁷ NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, (Newport, Wales, September 5, 2014), paragraph 14.

³⁸ The NATO Home Page, “Smart Defence,” last updated January 8, 2014, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/78125.htm> (accessed June 6, 2015).

³⁹ Vladimir Isachenkov, Associated Press, “Russia Continues Massive Military Modernization Despite Economic Woes,” *Business Insider*, UK, February 4, 2015, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/russia-continues-massive-military-modernization-despite-economic-woes-2015-2> (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁴⁰ Grigory Dukor, “Russian Defense Budget to Hit Record \$81 Billion in 2015,” *The Moscow Times*, October 16, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russian-defense-budget-to-hit-record-81bln-in-2015/509536.html> (June 6, 2015).

⁴¹ The 27 Non-US NATO member’s collective defense spending in 2014 totalled \$318.7 billion. The Globalist, “10 Facts: Sizing Up NATO’s Defense Spending” March 30, 2014, <http://www.theglobalist.com/10-facts-sizing-up-natos-defense-spending/> (accessed June 6, 2015).



when NATO was successfully improving and aiming to increase partnership with Russia. Generally speaking NATO's Strategic Concepts are intended to guide the Alliance for a period of 10-15 years. Though the current Strategic Concept is only five years old, the strategic landscape today is vastly different than it was in 2010. An updated Strategic Concept might more clearly specify a balance and prioritization of NATO's three core tasks. While acknowledging that collective defense is the rock upon which NATO was built and remains its *raison d'être*, a new Strategic Concept might also prioritize resources to crisis management and cooperative security by emphasizing decisions taken during the 2014 Wales Summit. It could more directly highlight the growing emphasis NATO has placed on interoperability within today's strategic context.

To gain efficiency, NATO might consider conducting a holistic analysis to categorize and prioritize its partners and partnership programs. While the PfP, ICI, and MD do categorize NATO's partners, a more streamlined approach which focuses less on geography and more on priority could be helpful. In light of current economic challenges, tough resource decisions could be more easily made with a focused prioritization of effort. Achieving doctrinal consensus within NATO and agreeing on a prioritization of partnership efforts would not only improve strategic interoperability within and external to the Alliance, it would be bound to improve trust among NATO members through the difficult process of achieving consensus on the Alliance's way ahead.

Smart Defence and Framework Nation initiatives should be optimized whenever possible. These initiatives are heavily reliant on national will as pooling and sharing reduces national control of assets and often only yields a relatively small fiscal savings. In the area of building trust however, both of these initiatives have great potential for nations to work together. Care must be exercised though to avoid creating "cliques" of small groups of nations within the Alliance. The potential for such cliques can already be seen in groupings such as the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany, and Poland)⁴²

and the Visegrad Group (The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia),⁴³ as well as in the Lancaster House Treaties (UK and France) of 2010.⁴⁴

Operationally and tactically, multinational training within the Alliance remains a strong point and should be sustained and even increased in frequency. From small unit training to large-scale exercises such as Trident Juncture 2015, NATO forces can leverage their relative proximity to one another to build and reinforce trust at multiple echelons. The United States' Joint Multinational Training Command (JMTC) in Germany provides a sophisticated, integrated multinational training environment. During the ISAF era, complex, multilateral Mission Rehearsal Exercises were staged to prepare and certify US and NATO units deploying into Afghanistan. Now, post-ISAF, with excess training capacity available, NATO could leverage the JMTC as a training center of excellence to work together on a scale not previously possible due to the operational tempo. One of the primary lines of effort of the JMTC is to "leverage the NATO framework." This could include synchronizing systems; focusing units on NATO STANAGs; attracting NATO's larger nations (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK) to participate more frequently and with larger formations; and "incorporating more multinational participation in the JMTC cadre."⁴⁵

Perhaps the most obvious suggestion to improve NATO interoperability, and potentially the hardest to put into practice, is standardizing equipment. Technology is often not readily shared within the Alliance and represents another element fueling the rift that poses a threat to Alliance unity. National and regional military industries currently compete with one another. Optimizing the sharing of technology and standardization of equipment can only benefit the interoperability of Alliance members. Programs such as the F-35 joint strike fighter are a good start, but to be truly successful, European and North American companies must compete on equal footing for future multinational equipment procurement if NATO is to overcome this challenge.

⁴² Charlotte Guériaux, New Eastern Europe Home Page, "The Revival of the Weimar Triangle," April 7, 2014, <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1174-the-revival-of-the-weimar-triangle> (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁴³ The Visegrad Group Home Page, "About the Visegrad Group," <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>, (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁴⁴ The Gov.UK Home Page, "UK-France Defence Co-operation Treaty announced," November 2, 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-defence-co-operation-treaty-announced--2> (accessed June 6, 2015).

⁴⁵ Col Adam Loveless, U.S. Army, JMTC Chief of Staff, e-mail to author, October 23, 2014.



Many officers serve for the first time in a NATO position late in their careers. The Alliance might consider incorporating officers into NATO billets at an earlier point in their careers, identify the brightest to attend advanced NATO education such as the NATO Defense College Senior Course, and then assign them to positions of significant responsibility within the Alliance. The earlier officers serve in a NATO billet, the longer they will have a full appreciation for the intricacies of working in a multinational environment. This knowledge not only benefits the Alliance during their assignment, but also serves to build trust and confidence within national command structures following the return of NATO experienced officers to national assignments.

The recent revamping of NATO's command structure shrinks the Alliance's manning to a lean 8,800 billets. While it is too soon to know whether this structure is right-sized or undersized, to properly assess the new staff structure, Alliance members must commit to filling their assigned billets, and to doing so with top quality officers. Filling assigned billets and nominating quality officers for competitive billets signals the importance that member nations place on the Alliance. To attract the

best and brightest, to seek NATO assignments, nations must prioritize NATO and emphasize its importance to national promotion boards and decision-making authorities. When nations' service cultures perceive assignment to NATO as career enhancing, NATO will attract top tier officers, and their assignment to NATO billets will deepen trust within other Alliance members.

Conclusion

The NATO Alliance is in the midst of its second major evolution in the past 25 years. The post-ISAF period begins as the post-Cold War era draws to a close. It requires new and updated strategy and revitalized trust among Allies. If NATO is to endure in the decades to come and be a force that wields its influence as an advocate for peace and stability in the world, it must take significant steps to redefine its focus and implement initiatives that build and restore trust. Interoperability lies at the heart of NATO's future. The degree to which the Alliance achieves interoperability, both internally and externally will correspond to the degree of relevance NATO holds in the post-ISAF world of 2015 and beyond.