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Strategy, Risk and Threat Perceptions in NATO

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Introduction

When NATO's Heads of State and Governments assembled in Chicago in May 2012 for the alliance's 25th summit they did so in a sombre mood. NATO is, arguably, facing the gravest challenge since its creation; lack of shared purpose translating into dwindling support for alliance ventures. The unspoken tension was between the American desire to use the alliance's role as a political and military support framework for its global geopolitics and the European allies who would like to focus on American security guarantees in Europe and less on what they are to be expected to deliver in return. NATO's pending failure of its Afghanistan operation has increased European scepticism towards out-of-area interventions. American policy-makers added to NATO's sclerosis by, in 2012, unilaterally reducing the American troop levels stationed in Europe to record lows, adding to concerns regarding the viability of collective defence in an alliance with only one primary security producer. Although the 2010 Strategic Concept stressed that NATO would do both Article 5 defence and out-of-area operations, in reality the members are preparing to do neither (NATO, 2010).

Studies of NATO strategy have tended to concentrate on deterrence and defence functions of the alliance, notably on how changing understandings of the military balance of power (Senghaas, 1972; Kaldor, 1981; Schwartz, 1983). Far less attention has been directed towards NATO's role as a forum of political consultation and cooperation and, by extension, the role that it played with regard to the military ability and political will to use for political purpose. NATO was always cast as an alliance of like-minded states united by shared norms and values. The defence of territory was from the outset fused with ideological and

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economic ideals. It is on this basis that the allies have executed a coherent grand strategy, giving guidance to security policy, defence strategy and military posture on a national and supranational level (AHA, 1974; Heller and Gillingham; 1992; Wenger, 2006). This is by no means a novel observation, but one that deserves restating, not least because it is an essential factor in the ways in which NATO has evolved as a producer of agreed understandings regarding the use of force and why this is, as will be argued here, no longer the case.

The outline of this chapter is straightforward. The text is structured into three sections, beginning with the nature and function of NATO strategy from 1949 and up to 1991. The second section deals with three core transatlantic tensions that arose with the demise of the Soviet Union over questions of burden-sharing – referring to the persistent and rapidly growing gap across the Atlantic in terms of defence capabilities; the question of power-sharing – pertaining to the role of the United States as alliance leader; and finally, the question of threat assessment – what would be NATO's mission in the post-Cold War world. The final section assesses the operations of NATO in Afghanistan and Libya, with an emphasis on the effects these missions have had on the alliance. In the Concluding Remarks section some thoughts are offered on the *status quo* and challenges facing the NATO in the years to come.

A Cold War creature

Since 1949, NATO has provided the West's foreign policy gravitas, informing the full range of foreign policy for its members. Membership in NATO was a decision that took a great many other decisions with it. Joining the Western Alliance influenced who to trade with, what cooperation partners were chosen and on what arenas to seek prestige objectives. As the sole transatlantic institutional link NATO played a vital part throughout the Cold War in maintaining strategic cohesion and Western unity. The efforts at unity, first captured in the Vandenberg Resolution (1948), the Brussels Treaty (1948) and the North Atlantic Treaty (1949), were later joined by a plethora of parallel dialogues ranging from intergovernmental contacts to scholarly forums and a web of interlocking institutions.

NATO of 2012 is a different organization from what it was at its creation. The western alliance was a reflection of the Cold War, delineating the boundaries between East and West in Europe and beyond. It was designed to stabilize the continent, contain Soviet expansion, and defend Western Europe and North America collectively against

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threat embodied in the Warsaw Pact. NATO was a military, political and ideological framework for transatlantic cooperation, while at the same time also being an instrument for American influence in Europe. This approach has been a source both of NATO's strength and resilience, but it was also a source of tension that has granted the alliance few periods of inner peace over the past six decades. The alliance's *raison d'être* was to make the allies capable of resisting, and if possible avoiding, war with the Soviet bloc. How this single threat would be best met was the crux of all the main intra-alliance debates during the Cold War.

The credibility of NATO as a defence pact was from the onset based on American pre-eminence. On a military level, Western Europe was an American protectorate, captured in Geir Lundestad's label 'Empire' by invitation (Lundestad, 2003). Throughout the Cold War the United States was a European power (as opposed to a power in Europe) by virtue of a substantial troop presence fluctuating between 150,000 and 400,000 personnel. Article 5 of the Treaty stated that an attack on any member state was an attack on all, understood to imply a collective obligation to mobilize and counterattack. American bases and military personnel in Europe were seen as a guarantee of the American commitment to Europe. The strategic posture of NATO during the Cold War was unstable in two key respects. First, it was uncertain whether the overarching nuclear 'balance of terror' would also deter conflict at lower levels. Did the prospect of escalation into a full-scale war deter also minor armed clashes, or could incidents develop and multiply because the nuclear balance of power made escalation less likely? Second, the idea of extended deterrence meant that the American nuclear umbrella effectively covered the allied countries. Was US assistance credible if such assistance implied a direct nuclear threat against the American homeland?

As early as the 1950s, the Atlantic alliance was seen as a 'troubled partnership'. Richard L. Kugler singles out four key developments that NATO underwent during its first decade: the creation of an integrated military structure, the establishment of a lasting US military presence in Central Europe, the acceptance of American strategic leadership and the agreement on the rearmament of West Germany (Kugler, 1990). The year 1954 was arguably the most important year in NATO's existence. That year saw the inclusion of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) into the transatlantic alliance (Fursdon, 1980, p. 9; Bozo, 2001, pp. 10–23). The US military planners had already in 1948 arrived at a conclusion that Western Europe could not be defended without substantial German contributions (Harder, 2000). In 1950 Pentagon plans for a

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highly developed NATO force posture including a large US force presence in Europe were contingent on German rearmament. The debate on German rearmament in the early 1950s ended in the landmark Paris agreement of October 1954, which bestowed sovereignty on Western Germany and allowed for the creation of an army of such size that it could feasibly defend itself (Kanarowski, 1982).

This happened only after less feasible plans, such as a Soviet-sponsored initiative to reunite Germany and the Pleven Plan for an autonomous European Defence Community, had foundered (Fursdon, 1980). The Paris agreement allowed for the western victory powers and West Germany to pool their forces in the effort to protecting the exposed central flank in a posture that would endure more or less unchanged for three decades (Park, 1990). The problem was, of course, that Europe was at the height of post-war reconstruction and there was generally little desire to divert scarce funds from public works towards the sort of near-wartime levels of defence spending envisioned by American military planners. In practice, the German contribution was taken as a green light to scale back armies in other European countries. As a result, the European allies would not shoulder their portion of the defence burden of the West: the American resources committed to Europe became far more substantial than was initially envisaged, handing down what Stanley Sloan calls 'a legacy with which NATO struggled until the end of the Cold War' (Sloan, 2003, p. 3).

The inherent ambiguities of nuclear deterrence were reflected in the official Strategic Concepts of NATO. The first fundamental debate on the tenets of NATO strategy was sparked by the Soviet Union gaining and rapidly expanding a nuclear arsenal combined with residual tensions over the Korean War, as well as the Hungarian uprising and Suez crisis of 1956. The issue of the debate was whether 'New Look' was having more far-reaching strategic implications than supposed. The NATO military planners were in a dilemma with regard to the integration of nuclear weapons due to the shift in US policy. In 1953 the Ridgeway Report concluded that nuclear weapons necessitated larger conventional forces because the casualty rates were expected to be higher (Winand, 1993; Schwartz, 1983; Deporte, 1986). But as such contributions were not politically feasible. NATO in 1957 agreed to the MC 14/2, which envisaged the immediate use of the alliance's nuclear weapons in response to a major attack, the strategy that came to be known as 'massive retaliation'. This scenario for mutual assured destruction, known by its acronym MAD, was deterrence pure and simple.

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From the 1960s, the European uneasiness in NATO was voiced most explicitly by the French. The mechanics of nuclear deterrence raised concerns: would, as the French asked themselves, the United States be willing to risk New York and Washington in order to defend Paris? The French answer to this question was, on balance, not affirmative. The strategic rationale of an independent French nuclear force – the *Force de Frappe* – was to make European deterrence more credible and to give France a seat at the table at a time when the dealings between the two power blocs were increasingly determined by the Russo-American bilateralism. The price was a discord in NATO strategy and command that extended well into the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War, NATO was a collective defence pact for the member states, confined to the boundaries of this area. The organization was not, accordingly, geared towards projecting force out of area. Separate defence leagues and bilateral agreements were in operation in other parts of the world. NATO's role was not that of extraterritorial police force, or indeed a support framework for American geopolitics. When the United States sent troops to Vietnam in 1965, they did so alone.

Disagreement over NATO's political role built up through the Berlin and Cuban missile crises and erupted in January 1963, when Charles de Gaulle announced his veto to Britain's admission to the Common Market, rejected hosting US Polaris missiles and signed a bilateral treaty of friendship with Konrad Adenauer. As the French President explained to the German Chancellor, 'America only envisages an alliance on the condition that it commands it' (De Gaulle, 1987, p. 267, authors' translation). The machinations of the mid-1960s revolved around such important questions as the management and application of nuclear power and the perception of the Soviet threat. One was the designing political structures that would allow the multilateralization of the emerging US–Soviet détente and accommodate the needs of an economically revived, and politically more assertive, Europe. Since an overly strong reliance on nuclear deterrence was risky brinkmanship or, alternatively, not credible due to the prospect of catastrophic retaliation, internal debates paved the way for a new strategic concept. In 1967, the strategy was rephrased as *flexible response*, adapting the means of reply to the level and character of the threats and aggressive advances at hand.

The doctrine of flexible response had two origins: one in the United States and one in Europe. The result was that the strategies first advocated by the Kennedy administration in 1962 and the MC 14/3 were different. The American debate reflected a shifting tactical emphasis away from counter-city targeting to counter force and counter value as

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well as renewed emphasis on conventional defence. The idea presented was one of controlled nuclear escalation as opposed to the practice of permanent targeted soviet cities, while it did not imply American unwillingness to make first use of nuclear weapons. There was considerable resistance in Europe where the policy shift was met with concerns that the United States was weakening its alliance commitment (Stromseth, 1988, pp. 151–174).

The doctrinal shift was only accepted in Europe after the new version of the MC 14/3 spelled out how escalation would work in practice. Flexible response predicated less severe response to minor episodes which had a political price, but it reduced the risk of lower-level conflicts spiralling out of control. In European NATO capitals there was a shared sense that the reduced tensions should be met with renewed dialogue with the aim of reducing threats further. The new balance between NATO's military and its political functions was articulated in the 1967 *Harmel Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance*, the first effort to develop a strategy for NATO in a political sense. The Report has been referred to as the 'Magna Carta' of NATO with some justification in that it defines an 'ultimate political purpose' of the alliance (Brockpähler, 1990). The Report made it clear that NATO would pursue a policy of détente, with the explicit aim of de-escalating East–West rivalry.

There are four statements in the Harmel Report that need further highlighting. While reaffirming the alliance's primary tasks as being to deter and defend, paragraph 8 of the Report affirms NATO's determination to resolve the underlying political issues such as the division of Germany. Paragraph 5 of the Report carries a vision of détente, meaning a balance of force that would help create a climate of stability, security and confidence. The dual approach of credible collective defence combined with cohabitation with the Eastern bloc was to carry NATO into the post-Cold War world. But the Report also had forward-looking elements. Paragraph 9 of the Harmel Report states that 'the ultimate political purpose of the alliance is to achieve a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe accompanied by appropriate security guarantees'. This goal remains unchanged to this date. Finally, paragraph 15 of the document outlines the global role of NATO: 'The North Atlantic Treaty Area cannot be treated in isolation from the rest of the world. Crisis and conflicts arising outside the area may impair its security either directly or by affecting the global balance' (NATO, 1967). This phrase was to receive new relevance as the threat that NATO has been created to avert subsided with the abolition of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in 1991.

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The lost consensus

The immediate implication of the end of the Cold War – the fall of the Berlin wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – was that NATO found itself without the threat it had been created to deter. As one of the alliance's leading thinkers, Jamie Shea, noted:

> In the post-Cold War era security has become muffled. Although the classic threat has disappeared, new security threats and challenges have proliferated and allies do not necessarily have the same perceptions as to what they are. The threats are today latent and whether or not to address them is voluntary as opposed to the imperatives of the Cold War threats exemplified by Soviet tanks on the inner-German border.

Since 1991, NATO strategy has been revised several times. The organization has been transformed radically, and the level of internal disagreement has increased, since the overall *rationale* of NATO remains contested.

The alliance was faced with the challenge of transforming its *raison d'être*; first, by deciding how to relate to the former adversaries in the Soviet bloc, and second, by redefining its Strategic Concept and changing its mode of operation. Resolving these questions were made harder by NATOs Cold War legacy: first, despite half a century of debate, NATO had proved incapable of generating anything resembling an equal transatlantic burden-sharing. This gap grew into a chasm as European states reaped the peace dividend, reducing defence spending. This trend was compounded by a steadily growing gap in technology and military capabilities across the Atlantic that hampered inter-operability. Second, much of the same situation was reflected in the case of power-sharing within the alliance, where the United States had grown accustomed to holding a position of primacy akin to that held by the USSR in the Warsaw Treaty Organisation. Finally, the collapse of the USSR, the great unifier, left NATO without a common enemy to justify its policies and without an agreed purpose underpinning its future.

A RAND Corporation study published in the mid-1990s is widely regarded as having had a vital impact on the shaping of American NATO policies. The study recommended transforming NATO from a collective defence alliance into a communal security grouping based on common democratic values (Asmus and Nurick, 1996, p. 142 – see also Asmus et al., 1993). For this reason Eastern enlargement came to be

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considered by many as the solution to NATO's self-preservation challenge. Some, including former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, hoped that the act of enlargement would bring a new momentum to the alliance (Brzezinski, 2001). The question of enlargement would soak up NATO's political and administrative resources for much of the 1990s. Enlargement proceeded in two stages. From 1999 NATO comprised the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and from 2004 also Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Rumania, Slovakia and Slovenia. On the one hand, the gradual enclosure of Russia was partially softened by an agreement of diplomatic consultations, although Russia reacted negatively to the enlargement as well as to NATO's deployment of a proposed missile shield in former Warsaw Pact countries. On the other hand, enlargement meant, 'not least' because the frontline defences were not extended into the new frontline members, that NATO became less coherent as a collective defence pact.

The 1991 Strategic Concept was formally revised in 1999 to reflect the new security situation in Europe amidst the final chapter of the Balkan wars. The document went through a great many drafting processes and ended up as a sprawling blend of ideological affirmations and listings of potential threats. Where the Strategic Concept had less to offer was on the topic of NATO's purpose. The absence of any agreed clear and present threat undercut the strategic aspects of the strategy. The limited added value of the document and the excruciating nature of the drafting process led several of the people involved in the drafting process to question whether the exercise had been worth the effort.[1]

In 1999 NATO stressed the importance of cooperation with former adversaries, to improve the security of all of Europe. NATO forces could be scaled down while mobility and adaptability to new circumstances were to be increased. This was a response to the American notion that NATO would have to go 'out of area or out of business' (Patrick, 2009). This meant that the new 'price tag' for US security guarantees would be for the NATO members to provide military support for American global politics. NATO's structure of planning and command was adapted according to the new idea of rapid deployment in a variety of crisis scenarios. Based on experience with handling the Yugoslav civil war of the mid-1990s, the strategic revision was brought a long step further. Consequently, the new Strategic Concept suggested that NATO's traditional role of collective territorial defence, stemming from the member states' commitment under Article 5, though still necessary, was no longer sufficient to underpin the alliance (NATO, 1999). The deployment of forces out of area was explicitly endorsed. NATO was redefined

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as an instrument for crisis management both within and beyond the collective defence area.

During the first decade of the new century, NATO faced the challenge of becoming over-burdened. The major tasks were not clear, and the tendency was that a wide array of challenges, potential or otherwise, were elevated to the level of threat. In the revised Strategic Concept of 2010, the tripartite function of collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security was addressed (NATO, 2010). NATO should strengthen its ties with Russia while including a common anti-missile defence system. It should also expand into fighting terrorism, organized crime and piracy. Civil–military relations in conflict areas became part of the expanded NATO doctrine. The threat perception became wider, but also less focused and more controversial. With regard to the military ability and political will to use for political purpose, the compromise reached was that NATO should be both about collective defence and out-of-area operation. The problem not addressed was that the Afghan operation had shown that the two types of tasks require vastly different capabilities, institutional frameworks and training. As had been the case so many times in the past, political impasse was resolved in defence spending. Both the United States and its European allies sharply reduced military spending (Hallams and Schreer, 2012, p. 315).

Repurposing NATO

Bosnia and Kosovo: Attempts at crisis management

A major operational turning point for NATO occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina towards the mid-1990s. Neither the UN Security Council nor the European Union (EU) was able to concentrate on a joint course of action in the Balkans crisis. As this was a European crisis, NATO was the likely military instrument, provided that the 1991 Strategic Concept's phrase 'appropriate crisis management measures ... including those in the military field' was understood to include operations out of area (NATO, 1991, Art 32). After the UN mandate was given, the SFOR (Stabilization force) in Bosnia, followed by KFOR in Kosovo, drove NATO into a more active crisis management role. These operations demonstrated that the political and military capacity of NATO depended on American leadership, but also that NATO was unprepared for these types of operations. The NATO members had difficulties in deploying, then in sustaining forces once in the field as well as in interacting effectively with other NATO forces (NATO, 1997).

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The NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999, with air strikes towards Belgrade, again highlighted the unevenness of the alliance. During the Kosovo air campaign the Americans would shoulder most of the burden of the military operations. American warplanes flew 80 per cent of the 10,484 strike missions, supplied 90 per cent of the command, control and communications facilities and launched over 90 per cent of the 'smart' weapons (Drozdiak, 1999). KFOR was the immediate backdrop to the new strategic concept in which out-of-area operations were codified. NATO, in the Balkan crisis, followed from the revised threat perceptions after the Cold War – regional instability, the risk of wider repercussions in neighbouring states and refugee flows across borders. Jihadists from Arab countries also played a role in the Yugoslav conflicts, a prelude to the challenges that would later be faced by NATO in Afghanistan.

The Kosovo War also gave birth to a new Europe – only security framework– what came to be known as the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The initiative sprung from a bilateral initiative launched at the French port of Saint Malo where France and Britain agreed to breathe new life into the old vision of a joint European force. Although the two countries differed in strategic outlooks they were equally appalled that Europe again had proved manifestly unable to prevent a relatively small crisis on its own doorstep from spiralling out of control. The Saint Malo statement charted a middle path between the French position – 'The European Union needs to be in a position to play its full role on the international stage' with a 'capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military force' – and the British view: 'while acting in conformity with our respective obligations in NATO, we are contributing to the vitality of a modernised Atlantic alliance which is the foundation of the collective defence of its members' (Joint Declaration on European Defence).

This agreement did little to resolve the inter-institutional tensions that ensued. The uneasiness in the EU–NATO interaction is well known. Despite overlapping members and missions there is surprisingly little substantial cooperation between the Europe's two primary security institutions. The formal framework for dialogue, the Political and Security Committee (PSC)–North Atlantic Council (NAC) meetings, has not become the forum envisioned in the 2003 Berlin-Plus agreement. When NATO and EU ambassadors meet, they are only authorized to discuss 'joint EU-NATO operations' – of which there, as well as regarding capability initiatives, have been preciously few. Other important issues, such as anti-terror cooperation, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan are simply not on the agenda. It is no secret that this state of affairs may to no small

degree be attributed to the impasse between EU member Cyprus and NATO member Turkey. The intricacies of the dispute are too complex to revisit in detail, but the outcome of the impasse has been that NATO and the EU for the first decade of the 2000s were an either–or configuration, with little formal or indeed informal cooperation (for more on the Turkey–Cyprus issues, see Duke, 2008).

Afghanistan: state building or war on terror?

The Afghanistan operation has – even more explicit than SFOR/KFOR – made the tensions and varieties of concerns within NATO evident. The US intervention started as a direct response to the terrorist attacks that took place on 11 September 2001, directed against terrorist safe havens provided for by the Taliban regime. NATO theatrically invoked the collective defence Article 5 for the first time in the history of the alliance the day after the attacks and reluctantly recognized the Afghan intervention in late 2001 to be an Article 5 operation. What is notable is that the member states did not interpret Article 5, as had been agreed during the Cold War, as a promise of immediate military assistance but rather as an invitation to consultations about troop contributions. The European member states were for the most part adamant that Article 5 did not entail any automatic military support in Afghanistan, or indeed the Iraq conflict two years later. Despite the best of intentions, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this intermezzo weakened NATO's defensive alliance aspect further.

In Afghanistan, the strategy was at first a limited military deployment in support of the Northern Alliance in the civil war against the Taliban regime. The limited aim of regime change met with success at an early stage, but the wider aim of stabilising the country, containing terrorism and hunting down Al-Qaida fighters turned out to drag the intervention forces into a quagmire. The allied ISAF operation was transformed into a formal NATO responsibility from August 2003. The transfer was accompanied by a proliferation of objectives, from strengthening human rights to democratizing Afghanistan, promoting gender equality, economic development and so on, and it gave the foreign intervention a hint of the surreal, as the revolt spread, the narcotics production grew and corruption permeated what was widely seen as a marionette government (Suhrke, 2011). The shared operational responsibility did not make the operation more efficient, but it was seen to make it more legitimate, particularly with domestic European audiences. As eventually all NATO members dispatched forces to the country, there were inter-alliance disputes over nearly every aspect of

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the military operations. And so it was that an alliance that had only a handful of troops in Afghanistan at the time of Kabul's fall in 2001 counted upwards 130,000 troops ten years later. This was, as Astrid Suhrke points out in her authoritative work on the conflict, more soldiers than the Soviet Union had in Afghanistan at any point during its brutal war of the 1980s (Suhrke, 2011, p. 262).

The escalation is inextricably linked to the kaleidoscopically shifting objectives of the operation, not least because the ever-growing ambitions have – in tandem with the lack of goal achievement – been cited as the reason for the escalation in a self-reinforcing circular argument. The ISAF operation can be said to fall into five distinct narrative phases. The period from 2001 to 2003 can be summarized under the heading 'war on terror'. NATO was in Afghanistan to eliminate terrorists and their supporters. This led in 2003 to the 'Marshall Plan Hindu Kush' phase where the major combat operations were assumed to be over and focus was on getting the economic and social wheels turning. The years 2006–2009 noted that 'the first bomb, then build' of civil–military cooperation was in accordance with NATO's 'shape, clear, hold, build' doctrine. The period 2009–2010 was marked by 'We are President Karzai's soldiers' where the United States sent 30,000 new troops while 'Afghan ownership' was a central theme. This has in 2011 led into 'not Switzerland' – where the focus is on lowering expectations that Western powers had built up under the Marshall planning phase. In 2011 President Obama announced that the bulk of US troops would be out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Most experts agree that NATO will most likely leave Afghanistan with little to show for its considerable efforts.

In Afghanistan NATO took on an operation that absorbed much of its political and military resources throughout the first decade of the 2000s. The difficulties involved in reforming NATO, while at the same time carrying out a large out-of-area operation, are illustrated in the fate of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The initiative was launched at the 2002 Prague NATO Summit and declared operational four years later at the summit in Riga. The NRF was branded as a dynamo for the continued relevance of NATO and a catalyst for the transformation of the alliance – a reformed instrument of collective action. The 24,000 strong task force was to be drawn from the best capabilities available among the NATO members. The NRF was intended to give the alliance an immediate capacity for defence that had been lost with the abandonment of the Cold War contingency plans (NATO, 2002). The NRF did not deliver on its initial promise (Winkler, 2007). In 2012, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta pledged to contribute a US-based Army brigade

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to the NRF, in an attempt to reassure European allies after a round of cuts in American troops that brought the number to a record low of little more than 30,000. This meant that the inter-allied joint exercises will be less frequent than in the past, leaving renewed concerns over NATO inter-operability.

Mission creep in Libya

While NATO was planning for what promises to be a tumultuous retreat from Afghanistan, the member states were taken by surprise by the Arab Spring. The upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and in the Middle East did not call for Western intervention, but the unrest that rose towards a civil war in eastern Libya led to a bombing campaign by NATO countries. Gadhafi's forces threatened to crush the ragtag revolutionaries in their stronghold in Benghazi. The Transitional National Council tried to coordinate the rebellion and seek foreign support. As the regular army rolled back the rebels by mid-March 2011, the UN Security Council passed a resolution that authorized outside measures to protect civilians and impose a no-fly zone in the Libyan air space (IISS, 2011, pp. 67–72). The air attacks that started on 19 March effectively stopped the regime's forces on the road to Benghazi, and imposition of the no-fly zone started shortly afterwards. NATO forces from several countries took part in ground attacks against the Libyan army, while some Arab countries flew supporting missions and assisted in overseeing the no-fly zone. The rebellion against Gadhafi's regime would most likely have failed without NATO support. As operations evolved the NATO allies stretched the UN mandate's no-fly zone to include attacks on the infrastructure of Gadhafi's regime and – if media reports are to be believed – put irregular forces on the ground to assist the inexperienced rebels.

France took the lead in forming a consensus for intervention. After briefly considering an EU mission and being rebuffed by German opposition, the case was put before the NATO council. What came to pass in these debates remain murky. Newspaper reports indicated that France and Britain were the chief proponents pro while Germany and Turkey led those opposed to the mission (Dempsey and Myers, 2012). The United States, reluctant to take ownership of the mission, as they had done in Kosovo, took the back seat in the deliberations. The result, by some accounts, was the most hostile debate in the alliance's history. As one NATO official who was present put it, 'accusations were made from both camps that will not be easily forgotten'.[2] With little time to spare as the revolutionaries were in imminent danger of being overrun, NATO arrived at an arrangement that may have fateful consequences for

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the future of the alliance: the bulk of the allies abstained, leaving only six members to carry out the mission on behalf of the alliance.

The international operation in Libya was, it should be noted, atypical for Western military interventions after the end of the Cold War. The Libyan campaign started on European initiative, specifically from France and the United Kingdom. The main argument was that the regime's reoccupation of Benghazi would result in a massacre of civilians, and that the international community had endorsed the principle of a 'responsibility to protect' in other crisis areas. This moved the UN resolution, even if China and Russia abstained. The United States initially supported the French–British initiative with some reluctance, but saw an advantage in an operation led by European powers with US military support. Increasingly, the United States took the lead from behind, as one commentator succinctly phrased it:

> Discreet US military assistance with France and Britain doing the trumpeting was sensible. Discreet does not mean desultory. The United States took out Libya's air defence system. It provided more than 70 per cent of the surveillance, intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities. It flew 70 per cent of refuelling missions. What it did not do was wade into Libya with the army it had in the vanguard of a motley coalition of the willing.
>
> (Cohen, 2011)

It was not only the French–British initiative that was noteworthy. NATO was more than usually fragmented over the Libyan campaign. Turkey was vocally opposed to the mission, and Germany took no stand, neither did Poland. In fact, less than half of the alliance members participated, and strike missions were undertaken by less than a third of the member states. US officials complained about the unwillingness of NATO members, but also about their inadequate military capabilities, a result of persistent cuts in defence spending (Gates, 2011). The Libyan mission, further, raised questions about the command structure of NATO in action. A joint French–British command was unacceptable to other NATO members and does not seem to have tempted the British either. The United States was from the beginning eager to avoid the forefront. The chosen option – a joint NATO command – was not noteworthy as such, but it was questionable since several member states did little to hide their opposition to the operation. In this respect, the Libyan mission seems to have heralded the end of the collectively engaging alliance.

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Another notable feature of the NATO campaign in Libya was the mission creep during the air raids. What started out as an operation to protect civilians soon became an operation for regime change and ousting Gadhafi from power. By mid-2011, this was an explicit objective in US, French and British interpretations of the UN mandate. At the same time, the initial pretexts for intervention – a regime committing 'genocide', Gadhafi's forces 'killing the Libyan people' – turned out to be gross exaggerations. The number of civilian casualties was not staggering, even if a reoccupation of Benghazi might have become nasty. For the rebels in the civil war, and probably also for the intervention forces, getting rid of Gadhafi was a primary objective (Roberts, 2011). President Sarkozy may have had exterior motives, being criticized for passivity during the upheavals in Tunisia and eager to show French initiative and strength on the doorstep to the hexagon. The unconventional role of the philosopher and activist Bernhard-Henri Lévy has also been singled out as a factor; he was travelling to Benghazi and bringing representatives from the Transitional National Council to Paris at an early stage.[3] The episode points to a key topic: the tribulations of France in NATO.

France in NATO: quest for a new transatlantic bargain

The end of the Cold War transformed the security situation in Western Europe. The European NATO countries were no longer fused by having a mutual enemy and a joint protector. Soon, centrifugal forces were tugging at the alliance as Germany focused its geopolitical interest eastwards, forging close ties with Russia. Britain continued to look west, to America for cooperation, and France was vacillating on whether to pull back from its Cold War sphere of interest in Mediterranean and North Africa, in order to seek more gainful relations and fears that such a move would remove the last semblance of great power status. Among the other NATO members the ambition was defensive, to prolong the traditional Atlantic alliance and the inexpensive security guarantees that came with it. In geopolitical terms, the fringes of Europe gravitated towards the United States as a major security guarantor, while the central continental powers – France and Germany – developed a more independent stance in the core of the EU.

France was seen as a reluctant ally during the Cold War. When President Charles de Gaulle and France withdrew from NATO's military command in 1966, this was the culmination of a series of specific grudges and one overall uncertainty. The US hegemonic leadership of NATO ran counter to French interests. The Suez crisis in 1956 and lack of American support for France's claims in Algeria were but examples of

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a broader struggle: America's geopolitical leadership of the West. France objected to this by developing its own deterrent, the *Force de Frappe*, accordingly. French attempts at establishing itself as an independent 'third force' was met with limited success during the Cold War. After the Cold War, France lost no time on taking charge of those who believed that security tight and asymmetrical transatlantic alliance was surplus to Europe's strategic requirements. There were Franco-American clashes over NATO enlargement policies, Middle East policies and the post-2001 'war on terror'.

The many French attempts at rapprochement were not met by Washington in a spirit of equality, so strongly desired in France. This basic lesson was repeated by Presidents Pompidou and Nixon, Giscard and Carter, and more recently, François Mitterrand and George Bush the Elder, and Jacques Chirac in his relations with Bill Clinton and George Bush the Younger. It is in this context that the French desire for European autonomy should be understood. But France was isolated in NATO on this position. In what many saw as a surprise move President Sarkozy effectuated a turnaround in French policies. What made French leaders reassess their position were three worrying trends. One, 'demand' factors outstripped 'supply' in European security. However, after a decade of the CSDP the initiative had yet to translate into a credible collective presence, which, due to the rapid decline of France and Britain, meant that Europe would have no seat at the high table in a multipolar system. Two, there was a shift in the American position. Under President George W. Bush, American scepticism towards EU military cooperation shifted from grudging acceptance to vocal support, raising the spectre of an American pull-out from Europe (Rees, 2011). Three, NATO's sustainability was in doubt. The operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya had done little to disprove the image of a politically fractured and militarily un-interoperable alliance (Toje, 2010).

In bringing about the French rapprochement President Sarkozy has been criticized in France for being overly pro American, but pro-American inclinations are hardly necessary to account for the French reorientation in 2008. By rejoining NATO's integrated military structure, France not only gained greater leeway for a French leadership in the alliance, as the French leadership in bringing about NATO air strikes in Libya indicate. The French shift was also seen, by decreasing American concerns on European 'ganging up', as increasing the scope for 'G-6' military cooperation within the EU – between Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain; attempts at independent military planning capability within the EU; and preserving a common EU

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arms market. What President Sarkozy was attempting was to build a genuine European power presence, but chose to do so in the spirit of the Saint Malo compromise, that is, within a broader transatlantic framework. NATO is perceived from Paris as less vital and therefore easier to accept.

In attempting to bring about a new transatlantic security architecture with a more equal EU presence, the French sought to avoid the sort of mistakes that had marred past attempts at Franco-American *rapprochement* (Bozo, 2008). A seasoned diplomat, Levitte sought to build confidence by strengthening Sarkozy's Atlanticist credentials: he offered 700 additional French troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan and proposed French reintegration into NATO's military structure.[4] Importantly, the French made these offers without asking for the sort of high-profile *quid pro quo* that had scuttled previous attempts at reintegration (Menon, 2000). Instead, France sought to persuade the Americans that EU defence would be the more likely venue to bring about the sort of force generation that NATO initiatives had failed to deliver (Wikileaks, 2011). This perspective found a sympathetic hearing in Washington. The position was put in plain terms by Victoria Nuland, the American ambassador to NATO, in a speech in Paris given in early 2008: 'I am here today in Paris to say that we agree with France'; she continued, 'Europe needs, the United States needs, NATO needs, the democratic world needs – a stronger, more capable European capacity' (Nuland, 2008). The American shift in *Europapolitik* was enduring and has been continued under the Obama administration, concerned that the current arrangements was slowly depleting NATO's military ability and political will to use for political purpose (Biden, 2009).

Sarkozy described his ambition as encompassing 'an independent European Defence and an Atlantic organization in which we play a full role' (Sarkozy, 2007). Three policy questions were singled out: inter-institutional cooperation, capability initiatives and intra-institutional reform. The Defence Minister, Hervé Morin, surprised his colleagues by stressing that these processes would be carried out in concert with the Americans (Lequesne, 2008). The strategy was based on 'untangling'. The overarching aims of revised transatlantic power and burden-sharing appear to have been compartmentalized into three main policy processes: unblocking EU–NATO cooperation; effective bolstering of European military capabilities; and making the CSDP into an actual fighting force. The idea was that rather than seeking another 'grand bargain', such as the 1998 Franco-British Saint Malo Declaration, the French would pursue a series of separate policy initiatives that it was

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hoped – given time – would fuse, synergise and bring about a new transatlantic security bargain. All three of these efforts were contingent on gaining British, German and American acceptance of and support for an autonomous European CSDP.

When added together, French initiatives undertaken during their 2008 presidency of the EU were less than successful. The promised revamped transatlantic security framework with one North American and one EU pillar bridged by NATO did not come to pass. One lesson learnt is that the United States carries less sway in Europe than is sometimes assumed. Although Paris managed to win wholehearted support in Washington for their defence agenda, this failed to result in similar support in London and, more notably, in Berlin. Painstaking negotiations failed during the French presidency to translate general objectives into detailed compromises. Throughout this process a recurrent challenge has been to strike a balance between the desirable and the possible. Sarkozy discovered that the scope for initiative in military matters was less than he had originally envisioned.

Concluding remarks

NATO formally survived after the end of the Cold War because it was redesigned and redefined. The enlargement into Eastern Europe was meant to stabilize substantial parts of the former Warsaw Pact, without provoking Russia. The reassurance of Russia was sought by formalized cooperation short of NATO membership. There is an uneasy borderline here. In military operations, the development of NATO since the 1990s is 'mission creep' in the most literal sense. The engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina – where NATO, in contrast to the United Nations and the EU, was led by a hegemonic superpower – opened up for a new doctrine and operations 'out of area'. NATO members even agreed to military operations against Serbia without a UN mandate and without a threat to the member area itself.

The Afghanistan campaign from late 2001 was formally defined as an Article 5 operation in the war against terror after 9/11, but gradually internal disagreements evolved. The ISAF force became a test case for the coherence and relevance of the alliance, with differentiated participation in various parts of the operation and different views on the objectives and modalities of the mission. In the Libya bombardments these fissures became manifest with open German and Turkish objections, and with the United States following behind a French–British initiative. On the one hand, NATO was more relevant to the new

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challenges and conflict situations, but on the other hand – and accordingly – less monolithic. The alliance had become more of a diplomatic field in a complex and opaque international environment. Fragile states were a huge challenge for international intervention after the Cold War. NATO projected force into this new anarchic environment, while collective defence and security as defined in the Cold War era receded into the background.

France left the integrated military structures in 1966, only to return in 2010. One reason why the reintegration failed to spark much interest was that France rejoined a different alliance than the one it had left. NATO is set to leave Afghanistan with little to show for its efforts. The underwhelming response to the Libyan intervention is an indicator that this may well be the last of the post-Cold War liberal interventions, at least for some time. One might say that the alliance has fallen into the trap of trying to please everyone; it ends up pleasing no-one. The 2010 strategic concept underlines this point by simply agreeing to focus on Article 5 operations (the penchant of the European allies) and out-of-area operations, the code word for supporting American geopolitical goals on a global stage. Developments outlined in this chapter give cause to question the viability of this compromise.

'The transatlantic alliance is dead.' The remark came after Western powers' annual security conference in Munich during spring 2012. Judy Dempsey, one of Europe's leading defence correspondents, said, put in plain words, what has long been whispered in the corridors.[5] NATO has struggled to find a new meaning after the Soviet Union, often jokingly referred to as 'the great uniter'. Somewhat simplified, the United States wanted NATO to take on the role of global police force, at America's request. European countries have generally been more concerned with American security guarantees to its allies in Europe. Since 1999, NATO has undertaken a number of overseas missions, mostly in defence of the UN Charter. In contrast to the rhetorical support for these wars, the European allies demonstrated their lack of enthusiasm for the new activism by cutting the defence budgets. NATO ex-UD defence spending as percentage of GDP fell from 2.05 in 1999 to 1.65 in 2008 (IISS, 2010, p. 110). The simple logic seems to be that those who do not own the equipment cannot be expected to send it to Afghanistan or Libya.

The European defence budgets have fallen by about 2 per cent year on year since the 1990s, while they grew in most other parts of the world, notably Asia (IISS, 2011, Chapter 5). France, Britain, Germany and Italy are still to be found among the ten countries in the world who spend the most on defence, but the funds are sold in limited military power

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intervention ability. The result is a dramatic drop in defence capacity. Countries that once mobilized hundreds of thousands now have difficulty to put a few hundred men in the field. Former US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, spoke of this in a speech to the European allies. He condemned European defence cuts, saying that America is tired of taking more than their share of the burden on behalf of those who 'evade the risks and costs' (Financial Times, 2011). The experience of Afghanistan has made the decision-makers in Washington to ask themselves whether it really is an interest to cover defence costs for countries that only partially support US geopolitical objectives.

The objective of NATO was – according to the alliance's first Secretary-General, Lord Ismay – to keep 'the Americans in, Russians out and the Germans down'.[6] The crux of NATO's geopolitical challenge is to be found in this trio. For many allies, NATO's feeble response to the Russian settlement in South Ossetia was disturbing – will the allies look the other way if a member state finds itself in the same situation? Part of the reason for NATO's response was that Germany shields Russia in NATO. Germany is not held down, on the contrary: perhaps the most important result of the current financial crisis is that 'where goes Germany, so goes Europe'. And the United States is no longer 'in'. In its new strategy, announced in January, the United States reduced its troop presence in Europe even further. This is noteworthy because NATO, anno 2012, has the capacity for collective defence, if the United States would choose to sit on the fence as many member states chose to do during the Libyan war. American defence expenditure fell from around 6 per cent of GNP in 1989 to 3 per cent in 2000 (Hallams and Schreer, 2012, p. 315). In the coming years the country will likely lose at least some of the technological edge that enabled them to defeat the opponents almost without loss. It will inevitably raise the threshold for intervention. NATO response force, the alliance's 'fire brigade', is in reality an American brigade, stationed in the United States. Superpower geopolitical refocusing means that the helper – and thus help – is further away than in the past.

In terms of military force, NATO has only to a limited degree transformed away from territorial defence capabilities towards out-of-area deployable forces. While it has been customary to blame this state of affairs on European misspending and non-military considerations, there may be cause to look closer. David Blagden and Anand Menon (forthcoming) have found that that the more vulnerable European states are to the threat of territorial aggression – that is, their perceived vulnerability to a military threat from a potentially hostile Russia – the less likely they are to generate out-of-area deployable capability at the

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expense of territorial defence capabilities. This argument dovetails with the creeping US military withdrawal from Europe.

It would seem that a mutually reinforcing dynamic is in play: shifting US geopolitical objectives leads to reduced interest in Europe which impacts European defence priorities, leading to reduced ability and willingness to join NATO to further US geopolitical objectives, leading to further reduced US interest in NATO. This opens a pregnant question: will NATO continue to be a military alliance or is it destined to become a political-military forum and a reservoir for ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing'? We may envisage a shift from the Article 5 spirit of solidarity towards the more discretionary logic of Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty (Daalder and Goldgeier, 2006, pp. 105–114).

Over Libya the alliance fragmented under pressure. This is important to note, because the very purpose of NATO has been to generate the military ability and political will to use for political purpose. This is arguably no longer the case. There is genuine cause for concern. The one factor that has allowed NATO to survive a persistent crisis, the one factor that the alliance cannot do without – American support – is diminished. Whether the creeping American disengagement will amount to forced equality with the EU picking up the slack or whether Europe will fragment – with different countries drawn to different poles in the emerging multipolar world order – remains to be seen. What remains certain is that NATO is no longer the alliance that it used to be.

Notes

1. Interview NATO HQ, 22 May 2011.
2. Interview with a political adviser to NATO Secretary-General's Policy Planning Unit, 12 September 2011.
3. Lévy's role was extensively covered and discussed in the French press in Spring 2011.
4. It was suggested to the authors that respective French and American spheres of interest in Africa were also discussed during this initial process.
5. Judy Dempsey speaking at the Leangkollen-seminaret of the Norweghian Atlantic Commitee, 7 February 2012.
6. As is so often the case with well-worn quotations, one has (so longing we can find) not been able to find some original source on when and where the precise words were actually first uttered.

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