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What is new and what is old in NATO's strategic concept?

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J. Peter Burgess
International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)
peter@prio.no

Background

Regardless of what we might think about its aims or means, it is difficult to avoid the commonplace assertion that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has run an extraordinary life-cycle. NATO has shown an extraordinary and quite unlikely ability to survive. In developing prognoses about its future, one must first reconcile oneself with this apparent immortality. The most superficial glance at history confirms that treaties and alliances come and go. There is nothing automatic about the existence of any given arrangement. NATO was born in 1949 out of a distinct need for mutual security relative to the Soviet Union, closely linked with both the principles and values in the UN Charter and the economic reforms of the Marshal Plan. This well-defined and quite principled starting point supported NATO throughout the Cold War. Since 1989, however the essence of NATO has been transformation. After no less than five enlargements, the most recent in 2004, the Partnership for Peace, the special arrangements with Russia and Ukraine, the Mediterranean Dialogue, etc., NATO has moved far away from both the original concepts and the original reality which made it seem a geopolitical necessity.

Concept and reality

How do we measure change in an organisation like NATO, the largest military alliance in history? A simple first cut analysis might begin by distinguishing between changes in the meaning of the central principles that carry the historical force and legitimacy of the alliance from the empirical facts on the ground. In short: is it the ideas that have changed or is it the world that has changed (or both)? Do terms like "collective defence", "security", "stability", etc. refer to something other than what they referred to in 1949 (Washington) or 1991 (Rome) or 1999 (Washington)? Or rather is it the world of events, of all that is not-NATO, that is

significantly changed, in such a way that the "fundamental" tasks that NATO accords itself must forcibly change?

The well-known basic **concept** of the 1949 NATO treaty is that the protection of "international peace and security and justice" is to be accomplished by promoting "conditions of stability and well-being" (Article 1). Consultation will take place in the Alliance whenever "territorial integrity, political independence or security" of any of its members is threatened (Article 4). This is not the place for a full analysis, however there are grounds to suggest that the interruption of the kind of stability and well-being that was codified in the 1949 treaty would perhaps not give legitimacy to the same kind of actions as it once did.

In terms of a changing **empirical** reality, much can be said about the new and changing world that a 50-year old alliance is obliged to confront. The world ticks in a significantly different way than it did in 1949. Clearly the political map of the world has changed immensely, particularly since 1989. But more importantly we experience a new and unique set of actual threats to the pillars "peace and liberty and security". Post-Cold War and residual post-colonial ethnic conflicts, migration, pandemic, transnational organized crime, and not least a new brand of transnational terrorism are just some of the new challenges that must be taken up in the debate. To link again to the original principles of the Alliance, these threats have little to do with "territorial integrity" and "political independence" that were central to the original conceptual architecture of the Alliance.

This awkward relationship between concept and reality in the self-understanding of the Alliance became clearly visible in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks. When, the day after the attacks in New York and the Washington the NATO treaty's Article 5 was invoked, little thought was given to the fact that virtually none of the parameters that were valid when the Article was formulated in 1949 were applicable with any degree of precision: The attacks were not carried out by a nation-state against a nation-state, there was no spatial contiguity, and, less obvious, the attack was not carried out against Europe, thus invoking the assistance of the US, but rather the contrary. Nor did the invocation of Article 5 actually lead to the application of NATO's traditional structure.

This is not an argument, as made by some, for the irrelevance of the Alliance. Rather, it is an appeal for a broader and more self-critical understanding of what the Alliance is or can be in our present day and age. The starting point is recognition of the dangers in thinking that the

Alliance is and always will be what it now is. To its credit the Alliance has been surprisingly supple in this regard. The "transformation" mentioned earlier is witness to NATO's response to a changing world with changing concepts. This process must continue, even leading to the thought that NATO mutate into a strictly diplomatic organ in which military operations one day cease to be a part of the thinkable portfolio.

Challenges to traditional concepts

If we take a more detailed look at the foundational texts of the Charter a number of fundamental challenges to our current understandings come to view. Let us look at three: the principle of the indivisibility of security, the question of values, and the problem of risk.

The indivisibility of security

One of the innovations of the 1991 Strategic Concept is the notion of "indivisibility" in describing the assured solidarity between members of the Alliance:

> The fundamental operating principle of the Alliance is that of common commitment and mutual cooperation among sovereign states in support of the **indivisibility of security** for all of its members.

The same formulation recurs in the 1999 Strategic Concept and is evoked in the official declaration from the Prague Summit. The "indivisibility of security" is essentially a fusion of two important notions. First, it is linked to the notion of "security equality", which is sometimes used in secondary documents. It can also be found in central documents from the Prague Summit. It is meant to modernize the notion at the heart of Article 5, that the security of one is the security of another. In other words, that security cannot be "divided". Second, it is an attempt to modernize the more traditional notion of solidarity, a solid pillar of the 1949 Charter. The moral sentiment built into the concept of solidarity is arguably alive and well in one form or another, although it may be tainted by Club of the North outlook, understood to be at odds with growing multiculturalism of both the US and Europe. This is for us another question. The notions of "indivisibility" and "security equality" present challenges that new thinking will have to take account of. On one level, differing social, cultural, and political trajectories of, on the one hand, many European nations and the EU in general, and, on the other hand, the US, lead one to question whether the security of one is the security of the other. The post-9/11 era is in part characterized by a general decline in objective insecurity, that is, objectively identifiable threats, distinctly on the geopolitical radar screen. Threats are far more perceived as simply of some qualified unknown.

This makes insecurity more individual and more subjective, and the common ground for experiences of the threat are weakened and disappear.

Values

Another key to the aims and legitimacy of the Alliance is the notion of values. In the 1999 Strategic Concept we read:

> Based on common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Alliance has worked since its inception to **secure** a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe.

A similar formulation can be found in the 1991 Charter. It is remarkable that the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are the basis for work to be carried out in Europe where most would consider that a "just and lasting peaceful order" has been stabilized for as long as NATO has existed. The formulation is ambiguous in the sense that it opens for the possibility that the **author** of the values is something or someone extra-European. In general, the question of **which** values, for **whom** and by **means of what** and on **whose** authority is left more or less open. Values, somewhat like insecurity, are context-bound and determined by political forces all the way from the individual, small group, societal and national levels. Furthermore, it is notable that the notion of value does **not** appear in the original charter of 1949. Only in 1991, **after** 1989, was it deemed important to base the work of securing Europe on these principles.

From insecurity to uncertainty: The rise of risk

Perhaps the most noticeable mutation in the three-part series of texts that make up the North Atlantic Treaty and its two new concept documents (1991 and 1999) is the emergence of the notion of *risk*. The study of risk and risk governance in the social sciences has increased significantly in scope in the last two decades. It corresponds in general to a market-driven need to quantify and of course minimize uncertainty about the future. **Not-knowing** what negative event the future holds costs money and efficiency when one competes with others who do know. Thus dangers become the object of the actuarial sciences. Risk can be calculated; the result of the calculation can serve as the basis for action, even without actual knowledge of the event.

Both of the newer documents on the Strategic Concept are replete with this notion of risk. The concept of "risk" replaces in more and more contexts the notion of danger or threat. The implication is that in today's "security environment", even though we do not know what the

danger is we can respond to that non-knowledge as a kind of knowledge. Even unknown danger can be integrated into the calculus of how to respond as though it were a kind of known danger. This implementation of risk thinking is a response to the rise of non-conventional, non-national, non-contiguous threats, precisely those that bring ambiguity to the interpretation of Article 5.

Conclusion: The coming strategic concept

A number of factors, both conceptual and empirical, come into play. On the conceptual side, the security needs and threat perceptions of individuals, groups and states will likely be different than they are today. The governance of risk will become even more entrenched than it is today. Threats to security will be increasingly understood as a more or less quantifiable, and more or less governable horizon of risk. Threat and danger themselves will be conceptualized differently, as something far less concrete, more invisible and more ubiquitous. "Risk governance" will thus become a central concept in the coming Alliance. On the empirical side, military operations will continue to resemble less and less those that were common when the Alliance was conceived as a counter-weight to the Soviet Union, and less those we see today. Today we are called upon different operations, with different tools, against different threats to different people.

There is evidence indicating that NATO's strategic concept will continue to mutate, and thus that NATO will continue to exist into the foreseeable future. Indeed it is difficult to imagine under what conditions the Alliance would dissolve itself and how such conditions should be met. In any case, the inertia of the life of institutions suggests that institutional suicide is very unlikely.

When considering the future of the Alliance, however, it is important to keep in mind that the basis for arguments about the obsolescence of NATO will also change. There will be new and different arguments for and against. There will be a new vision of liberty, evolved demands for stability, and completely new challenges to a significantly different conception of security. There is little indication that the European Union will develop into a military power that would in any way compete with the present power of the US. On the other hand, it might very well become a diplomatic tool to reckon with.