NATO’s Traditional Security Problems

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7.1 Introduction

Whenever attention has been paid to alliances during the last two decades reference is exclusively or nearly exclusively made to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Consequently, except for historical works, NATO serves as the ideal type of alliance (Walt 1990). This presents a variety of problems. First of all, NATO “was always intended to be both more and less than a military alliance” (Howard 1999: 164). More in the sense that NATO has always been the most important avenue of transatlantic security dialogue and less in the sense that NATO is not a fighting alliance. During its entire duration it never had to use force for the defence of the member states’ territory. This may well be its greatest achievement. If this is true, it is not entirely convincing to draw conclusions from this alliance for alliances generally (Howard 1999). Given the very few recent alliances, it is unconvincing to base alliance theory exclusively on NATO. It would be just as unconvincing to base any theory of alliances on NATO and the Warsaw Treaty, two very dissimilar entities of Cold War history. Methodologically, it is furthermore questionable to base the thinking on alliances exclusively on NATO as a full extrapolation one would thus apply is scientifically unsound.

When NATO’s success is mentioned reference is regularly made to the Alliance’s age. In spring 2010 the organization was 61 years old. It has certainly achieved a lot beyond its survival for such a long time. It is, however, again problematic to attribute some of the successes frequently mentioned to NATO. The success of deterrence during the Cold War, the success to end the East-West confrontation, the successful management of several post-Cold War conflicts, rallying support to counter terrorism, the collective attention attributed to cyber warfare, and the danger of proliferation are all cases in point. NATO has certainly been present at all these junctures since its inception in 1949 and at least has contributed to manage many of them. A closer look would not attest NATO’s prime role, rather its contribution to the change of European, Euro-Atlantic and, since the end of the Cold War, of global security.

This chapter attempts to discuss a narrow and specific though certainly crucial matter on NATO’s agenda: Its role in addressing traditional security problems. Although such a matter could be narrowed down to the application of the collective defence article of the Washington Treaty of 1949, it is necessary to broaden the subject further. The question has to be raised, which are the contingencies that would invoke the collective defence commitment of the Alliance. This leads to the question of what could be identified as traditional ‘hard’ and new ‘soft’ security threats (chap. 2 by Brauch). This chapter will not address other, however, important matters of the Alliance (Dunay 2008: 713–725).

7.2 Security Threats, Risks, and Challenges

The history of NATO’s existence can be divided into two phases. During the Cold War it functioned as a classical military-political alliance. It was its main task to deter a well-identified adversary, the Warsaw Treaty under the leadership of the Soviet Union (Schwartz 1983; Simon 1988). With the end of the Cold War and the advent of a new era the situation has changed fundamentally. The classical function to provide for protection and defence against another group of states, ‘against whom’ became irrelevant, interestingly at a time when the so-called ‘long peace’ (Gaddis 1989) of the Cold War came to an end and force was used again on the old continent. It gave way to a far less clearly identified threat. This was a threat originating from the emergence of certain phenomena and not associated with any country or coalition of states, i.e. NATO’s activity was moved to providing protection...
‘against what?’ Since then NATO has found it difficult to present a clear view of the prime threats it is facing.

Departing from the Cold War threat perception, the search for new threats occurred during a long transitory period. During that time NATO had difficulties to adapt to the changed security environment. In want of a classical threat the member states had two reactions: 1. There were attempts to portray the protraction of the residues of the old threat. 2. The Atlantic Alliance went ‘out of area’.

During the last phase of the decline and near collapse of the Soviet Union and in the first publicized strategic concept of the Atlantic Alliance the ‘old’ Soviet threat was assessed to exist based on the size of the Soviet, among others, nuclear arsenal (NATO 1991: para. 10).¹ The approach based on net capabilities combined with political uncertainty was excessive, although NATO lost its traditional adversary not much later, since Russia was sliding into chaos (chap. 13 by Sergunin; chap. 14 by Dunay). Russia’s weakness was far more significant than Russian strength for most of the 1990’s. Analysts nevertheless contemplated Russia’s potential to reappear as a threat to Europe (Glaser 1993: 19–21). The doubts that surrounded the credibility of such an approach were mounting and hence it was difficult to conceive that NATO could form cohesion on that basis. The Russian threat was simply not credible and intensive enough to underline NATO policy.

The situation has changed since the early 21st century. Russia has since appeared more prominent on NATO’s and its member states’ agenda for at least three reasons:

1. The Russian Federation under the leadership of Vladimir Putin has reconsolidated its statehood and allocated more resources to the military than in the 1990’s. Furthermore, in the second half of the decade the Russian Federation has embarked upon a defence reform. Although it has remained inconclusive (Fedorov 2009) it carried the promise that Russia will one day have a more effective military.² Furthermore, in the last years of the century’s first decade Russia returned to the long overdue modernization of its nuclear arsenal.³

2. The number of those NATO member states conditioned by history, which have lively concerns about Russia, has increased through enlargement. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are preconditioned by history to feel strongly about developments in Russia and to interpret them as worrying.

3. The actions of Russia in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century to assert her dominance in the post-Soviet space and curtail the freedom of choice of countries as far as their international alignment underlined the concerns of some NATO member states, if not the alliance as a whole. This has been exacerbated in 2008 when the Russian Federation used military force in an interstate contingency against Georgia, although the former did not initiate it. Even though the changes of Russia may affect the security perception of the Atlantic Alliance, they could be hardly sufficient to influence the entire alliance and shape its security agenda. With this in mind there is no security threat in Europe that could live up to the threshold of response of the Alliance as such.

There was very little to do to defend the sovereign territory of the then 16 NATO member states from external powers or their emerging alliance throughout the 1990’s. As it did not seem to change any time soon, NATO had to consider other security functions. It was not only a matter of survival for the organization as also one to retain continuing relevance. For the first half of the 1990’s it was not particularly difficult to find the new wherewithal of NATO. The war in the former Yugoslavia that Europe hoped to be able to manage on its own landed on the agenda of NATO. It happened in spite of the fact that the Strategic Concept of 1991 did not envisage participating in any crisis management or peacekeeping operations. This was the first geographical extension of the activity of the alliance. NATO decided to be Europe’s military crisis manager irrespective of the effect of the given crisis on the alliance or its member states. Yugoslavia was clearly not a contingency for the collective self-defence of the Alliance. NATO as an all-European institution retained its security relevance at a price of departing from its sound treaty base and thus arriving at an ambiguous situation. That was not positively greeted by states that opposed the expansion of NATO as an all-European institution.


² The new Russian military doctrine was approved on 5 February 2010 (Voyennaya 2010).

³ The document on the Russian state policy on nuclear deterrence was also approved on 5 February 2010.