HAS NATO A FUTURE?

Alyson Bailes, Director of SIPRI and former British ambassador to Finland, charts the possible ways forward.

NATO has survived more supposedly fatal blows than Rasputin. Even so, the years 2001–03 have given it a bumpier ride than most people can remember from any time in modern history.

The dramatic invocation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty in support of the USA on 12 September 2001, the day after the Al-Qaeda attacks, turned sour in retrospect when the USA failed to ask for any follow-up. Nevertheless, NATO persevered in 2002 with the effort to adapt itself to the new security challenges preoccupying the USA in particular. At the November Prague Summit the Alliance invited seven new Central European members to join, while avoiding damage (contrary to expectations) to the NATO/Russia partnership. It agreed on a streamlined command structure, a new Response Force and a new tightly-focused Capabilities Commitment, and adopted policy documents underlining that these instruments were designed (inter alia) to give NATO a potential role in the worldwide fight against terrorism. To crown the annum mirabilis, a political blockage, involving Greece and Turkey, which had prevented NATO and the European Union from collaborating as they were meant to do in the development of the new EU military capacity for crisis management, was lifted in December. Yet hardly had 2003 begun than the Alliance was thrown back in turmoil by a vicious split between France, Belgium and Germany on one side and the US and other members on the other regarding contingency planning to protect Turkey in the event of fall-out from possible military action against Iraq.

As often in the past, this chain of events has exposed the mutual dependence between NATO and the course of US/European relations more generally. The last couple of years have been a time of serious strain in the latter. Not only have differences emerged, quite soon after the attacks of September 11, on the most effective way to suppress and defend against terrorism; not only have the US and some leading Europeans been at odds over the use of military force to stop weapons of mass destruction proliferation in Iraq and elsewhere; but the two sides of the Atlantic have at least temporarily lost their consensus over handling such global issues as climate change, population control and the International Criminal Court. During the twentieth century when Euro-Atlantic relations were tense elsewhere—for instance, over trade—NATO was often able to correct the balance by demonstrating Atlantic unity over issues even more critical for life and death. In present circumstances, NATO is arguably failing to function either as the principal arena for debate over new security challenges, or as a kind of corrective ballast for the turbulence arising. This should not simply be blamed on a lack of concrete NATO achievement. The problem is rather that success in the agenda of the Cold War and the 1990s tends to be already filed as ‘completed business’, while it is still hard to be sure that the instruments NATO is preparing for the new age will be (in material terms) usable or (for political reasons) used.

It is natural in these conditions to question whether NATO has a future and if so, in what shape and role. The considerations involved are extremely complex but may be separated into two groups. First, what are the prospects for NATO’s success in its inherited agenda—the refinement of military capability for crisis-busting, the improvement of burden sharing between the full Alliance and Europe, and the consolidation of stability and partnership to the East? Is success on these fronts sufficient to satisfy all players, notably the US, that the Alliance is earning its keep (and justifying the resources devoted) in the new circumstances? If not—and we may already hint that the answer is No—a second set of questions comes into play about the role that NATO can play as a forum for re-building consensus across the Atlantic on the new global security agenda, and/or as a tool-box for pursuing joint action on an agenda perhaps pieced together elsewhere.

The adaptation of NATO’s military plans and potential is an unfinished agenda dating back to the end of the Cold War. During the latter, most Allies were organized primarily to defend their own territory in Europe, with only the US, UK and Canada...
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having a significant part of their troops stationed abroad in peace-time (and
reinforcement duties in war). In spite of the ‘flexible response’ doctrine, the
Alliance’s conventional forces were never expected to do the whole job anyway
because they were backed by nuclear weapons. With the shift of prevailing demands
during the 1990s towards active conflict management, and now in the 2000s to
intervention in other parts of the world, the context for military planning has
radically changed. Countries are judged by how much capability they can ‘export’
to foreign fields, how quickly they can get it there and how well they sustain it.
Both the men and machines involved have to be adaptable, multi-functional, tough,
self-sufficient and ‘interoperable’ to a degree formerly expected only from NATO
elites. As a further complication, and in contrast to NATO’s former multi-national
forces, a national contingent will never know in advance with whom it may need
to operate and under whose command. New-style intervention tasks are essentially
voluntary, and are likely to draw—for both technical and political reasons—on a
different ‘coalition’ of states each time.

Operations in the Balkans during the 1990s showed that NATO could not only
cope with such tasks, but achieve a level of convincing military superiority—a
‘hardness’—in doing them which no other institution could match. Ironically,
however, these and other real-life preoccupations slowed down the pace of systemic
change in NATO’s doctrines and structures, so that a scheme (Combined Joint Task
Forces) devised in 1994 for creating suitable command headquarters for coalition-
based interventions was still incomplete by the century’s end. Meanwhile, some
nations like the US, UK and France had re-styled their own forces and equipment
programmes to meet the needs of overseas deployments, while others had not.
European Allies’ defence spending was not only uneven, and often too low, but also
ill-coordinated so that while spending in total some 60% of what the US spent the
Europeans got only a fraction of the same ‘bang for the buck’. The results were
exposed at several points in the Balkan campaigns, notably during the bombing
phase of the action over Kosovo where an overwhelming share of the air-power
required had to be supplied by the US.

The Prague Summit decisions of end-2002 are NATO’s most determined effort
yet to dictate a transformation that actually has some chance of being carried out.
The new Capabilities Commitment (PCC) tells each ally exactly what it must do to
raise the quality of its assets earmarked for actions abroad, but it deliberately
concentrates on these assets alone and on just four dimensions of their suitability.
Meanwhile, the new NATO Response Force (NRF) is designed to intervene quickly
but also finish its task quickly, leaving less capable units (and possibly other nations)
to take over. It would take 20,000 men at most of which the majority could come
from larger nations, allowing smaller ones to make specialized ‘niche’ contributions.
Experts seem to agree that these are good prescriptions and capable of being fulfilled
within the couple of years’ deadline given—if all countries do what they are told.
The main doubts remain over whether the more sluggish Europeans can squeeze
out more resources even for such narrow targets: but also, over whether the US will
be ready in any real emergency to place its crack troops in an NRF framework with
all the institutional checks and disciplines involved. One may also wonder how far
Europeans’ performance will slip in those areas of their defence not spotlighted by
the PCC and NRF. The famous ‘capabilities gap’—a difference both in technological
levels and fighting techniques—between the Americans and Europe may be papered
over within the NRF, but can only yawn wider across the field of defence as a
whole.

Since the Helsinki Summit decisions of December 1999 there has been another
organization in Europe goading European States to improve their capabilities for
military deployments abroad: the European Union. The EU’s ‘Common European
Security and Defence Policy’ (CESDP) aims to create a joint capacity for military
 crisis management tasks, ranging from military-assisted evacuations to the tougher
end of the ‘peace enforcement’ spectrum. Since it does not involve guaranteed
common defence, all the EU’s members including four non-members of NATO can
take part equally. The CESDP sprang from a British-French initiative in which
Britain was particularly keen to find another lever to boost its neighbours’ defence
output; Britain and France were both interested in having a self-led option for the
use of European forces especially in situations mainly affecting Europeans’ interests,