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BRIEFING NOTE

What role for NATO?

by Charles Grant

NATO adapted well after the end of the Cold War. An organisation which had been focused on collective defence against the Soviet threat found new things to do: spreading security and stability through NATO enlargement to new members and partners in Central Europe, and applying force to impose – and then police – peace agreements in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Since September 11th, however, NATO has faced something of an existential crisis. The US chose to fight the Afghan war largely on its own, rather than through NATO, or alongside European allies. Some officials in the Bush administration have done little to hide their disdain for the alliance. The imminent enlargement of NATO, to be confirmed at the November summit in Prague, with seven Central European states will reduce its military cohesion. And the recent deal to establish a NATO-Russia council has reinforced the perception that the alliance is becoming a largely political body, rather than a serious military organisation.

Secretary-general George Robertson has called for NATO to develop a new role in fighting terrorism. But that struggle requires intelligence sharing among a minimum number of parties, great secrecy and the ability to move speedily. It is hard to think of a body less well-suited than NATO – for all its merits, a large, sometimes leaky, multinational bureaucracy – to lead the war against terrorism.

So why do we need NATO? The alliance is worth preserving, and reforming, for three reasons. The first is that NATO has a political role to play, in providing a forum for North Americans, Europeans and Russians to talk about common security concerns, such as proliferation, missile defence and the Balkans. NATO helps to keep the US directly involved in European affairs. Indeed, it remains the only important multilateral organisation which ties North Americans to Europeans.

Furthermore, no other organisation is so well suited to engage Russia's security establishment. Russia's armed forces are in bad need of reform: successive governments since the end of the Cold War have tried to modernise Russia's under-equipped, ill-disciplined and ineffective forces, without any success. The NATO-Russia council could provide the channels through which NATO members can help to modernise the Russian defence establishment. In the long run, if President Putin succeeds in making Russia a more Western country, and if the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy becomes more solid, NATO's political role could be the linking up of three pillars: the US, the EU and Russia.

NATO's second role should be to promote a single market in armaments and defence technology. On both sides of the Atlantic, the leading defence companies understand that the long-term trend is for transatlantic alliances in the defence industry. Europe's markets are simply too small to sustain world-class 'prime contractors' in the defence business. Similarly, US companies will not be able to win many contracts in Europe unless they team up with European firms. The best way to preserve some competition in the defence industry is for rival transatlantic alliances to compete against each other.

However, worries about national security, along with pork-barrel politics, have prevented the creation of a common defence market, even among the EU countries. If NATO could establish common rules on export controls, technology transfer, security of supply and fair procurement the allies would be more likely to trust each other, and open their markets. A single armaments market would make it easier for NATO forces to use common equipment and thus work together more effectively. NATO defence ministers need to create a new, high-level body to promote a common defence market. This body should replace the insufficiently active NATO Conference of National Armaments directors.

As Russia moves closer to the alliance, and gradually wins the confidence of NATO governments, some of its defence industries could become integrated with those of Europe and America. Despite almost zero domestic demand for the past decade, the Russian aerospace industry can still offer impressive technology and expertise, for example in transport aircraft, rockets launchers and many components for aircraft.

However, NATO needs to be more than just a forum for discussions, and an agency for promoting armaments co-operation. Its third role should still be military. NATO's military organisation encourages 'inter-operability' among the armed forces of NATO members and partners: it helps them to work alongside each other more easily. Particularly the new members will have to work hard to bring their military up to NATO standards. But over the years NATO has promoted common operating procedures, technical standards and rules of engagement. Coalitions as diverse as the US-led army that fought the Gulf War in 1991 and the European peacekeeping force in Kabul in 2002 – though neither was a NATO mission – could not have been so effective without NATO having fostered the habit of working together.

NATO needs its military organisation for two reasons. First, NATO's skills as an experienced and proficient provider of peacekeeping forces are still required – even if the EU will gradually take on a greater role in managing European security. Provided the on-going dispute between Greece and Turkey over the EU's access to NATO planning assets is eventually resolved, the EU will take over the peacekeeping mission in Macedonia in 2003. Later on the EU may well also take over the peace-support operation in Bosnia. But the fraught situation in Kosovo requires the involvement of NATO, and thus, implicitly, of the US. In other parts of the world, too – for example post-Saddam Iraq, or post-intifada Palestine – there will be a need for professional multinational peacekeeping. The forces in such places may or may not be branded "NATO", but that body is likely to be heavily involved in their management and preparation.

Second, NATO needs to develop a new military role, as a provider of multinational forces that could fight at short notice in a high-intensity conflict such as that in Afghanistan. During the course of 2002 President Bush's National Security Council developed this idea, and the Pentagon unveiled its plans for a NATO "Rapid Response Force" in September. Such a force would be available at a week or two's notice, and contain 20,000 troops from several NATO countries, including the US.

One rationale for a NATO Response Force is that it would encourage US commanders to take up European offers of military help. During the Afghan conflict the Pentagon was very reluctant to accept European offers. The US would probably be more willing to make use of European forces if NATO – rather than national governments – packaged and vetted those forces. The second rationale is to encourage Europeans to do more to develop high end military capabilities. The kinds of soldier suitable for the Rapid Response Force would be elite forces such as the British paratroops or marine commandos. Not many European countries have troops of such a high quality and at a high state of readiness; if they wanted to take part in the response force, they would have to spend more on defence and step up their efforts at military reform.

At the Prague summit, America's NATO allies are likely to agree to establish the response force. However, there have been grumblings in Paris – and to a lesser extent in other capitals too. One French concern is that the EU is already trying to establish a so-called rapid reaction force, (though officially it has never been called that), as part of its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Indeed, some senior French officials have even portrayed the American initiative as an attempt to weaken the ESDP. But in reality the two forces are aimed to do different things, and attempting to build one is not going to harm the others. The EU's rapid reaction force is primarily for humanitarian missions and peacekeeping. The NATO response force is designed for a serious shooting war. Some French analysts, to be sure, want the EU force

to be able to engage in a high-intensity conflict. However, most European governments are not that ambitious, recognising that the ESDP remains – for the time being – very embryonic.

There is a second concern in Paris. The NATO response force would almost certainly operate outside the NATO area. After the experience of the Kosovo air campaign, the US is not keen to have its troops operate in a distant conflict while under NATO command. As with the Afghan war, the Americans would probably want to run the mission through national chains of command. Therefore the North Atlantic Council – in which the European governments have a say, and theoretically a veto – would not be in charge. So the French worry is that the Europeans would be providing troops for the fulfilment of American strategic objectives.

These French fears may not be entirely groundless. But the Europeans need to take a step back and see the big picture. Many senior figures in the EU no longer see NATO as a very important organisation. If the Europeans wish to keep the US engaged in NATO, and thus in Europe, they need to adapt the alliance so that it is useful to the US. If NATO cannot come up with a real fighting force, NATO will be less important to the US. In any case, since NATO would be the body that prepared and managed the response force, NATO members would have a say in the roles, missions and organisation of the force. Any European country would be free to withhold its own troops, or in extremis to veto NATO's involvement in the mission concerned.

But if the rapid response force is a success, American respect for NATO will grow. And that is the most important reason why those committed to the ESDP should welcome attempts to modernise NATO's military organisation. For years to come, the European Security and Defence Policy will achieve very little without practical support from NATO's military organisation. Almost any conceivable EU military mission will need to draw upon NATO assets such as the expertise of its military planners. Some commentators suppose that NATO and the ESDP are in competition with each other. The truth is the contrary: they will sink or swim together. If the Europeans succeed in boosting their military capabilities, that would be good for NATO and good for the ESDP. But if they fail, both will suffer as a result.

Charles Grant is director the Centre for European Reform
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