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The Way to NATO's New Strategic Concept

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At the Strasbourg/Kehl summit in April 2009, NATO agreed – after years of long discussions – to draft a new strategy that will replace the Strategic Concept of 1999 and provide the Alliance with up to date strategic guidance.

The new document will differ significantly from its predecessor – not only with regard to its content but also its target audience and the way it will be drafted. Although NATO is in its earliest stages of the strategy debate, some observations on the materialization and the content of the new Strategic Concept can already be made.

1. The Process

Initially, a new strategy was supposed to be presented at NATO's 60th anniversary summit 2009, as the previous Strategic Concept was agreed upon when NATO celebrated its 50th birthday ten years ago. A number of factors baffled this intention. Despite the interest, particularly among the "new" NATO members (who joined the Alliance after the end of the cold war), in a new strategic foundation for NATO, many of the "old" members had their doubts. They pointed to the general and all encompassing character of the current strategy, asking whether NATO would find a consensus on developing something more specific. Moreover, there was concern that a publicly held strategic discussion could reveal how disunited NATO was on key questions like the future role of the Alliance. According to this view, a revision of the Strategic Concept could further erode NATO's already strained cohesion and would be a counterproductive effort.

There were also practical impediments, like the political calendar in the United

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States. President Obama, who took office in January 2009, would not have been able to install the entire administration early enough to engage fully in a debate on the basics of the Alliance.

As an intermediate solution, a Transatlantic Declaration had been proposed to provide NATO with some political guidance until the new strategy was finalized. This document, called the Declaration on Alliance Security (DAS) and written under the auspices of Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, was adopted at NATO's Strasbourg/Kehl summit. Unfortunately, the document made only very general political statements, disappointing those who were expecting some strategic counseling for NATO's further evolution. Its evolution also set the tone for the upcoming debate on the new strategy, as even the general statements in the two-page paper were highly contested until the very last moment before the summit and required decisions at the highest political level.

The most interesting part of the DAS (and the most contended one) is the last paragraph, as it contains carefully negotiated wording on how the new Strategic Concept will be drafted. While previous NATO core documents were drafted by the NATO Council (a Committee of representatives of each member state), this time the NATO Secretary General will be in charge of the process. He will develop the new strategy, drawing on the advice of a group of external experts.

a) The Secretary General

The present Secretary General will not be initiating and steering the strategic debate in NATO. This will be the responsibility of his successor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who will take up his duties in August 2009. Rasmussen, currently prime minister of Denmark, will be the first NATO Secretary General who has been a head of a government. Having met other Allied heads of states and governments at NATO or EU meetings before, frequently on the same eye level, in his new function he will have privileged access

to the highest political level. One might expect that he will try to use this political capital to upgrade the role and the leverage of the function of the Secretary General. Some observers assume that he will try to find support for more NATO summit meetings (like in the EU) in order to have more NATO issues debated and decided at heads of states' level.

In 1999, it was already difficult to agree on a wording with 16 out of 19 member states (three had joined the Alliance only weeks before the Strategic Concept was approved). In today's NATO with 28 or 29 (after the admission of FYROM¹) members, the attempt to develop a text sentence by sentence would be a hopeless enterprise. Rasmussen has therefore been requested to appoint and lead a group of experts – probably renowned politicians or top diplomats – to do the groundwork on the new strategy. This “Wise Men Group” could be significantly smaller than a NATO committee with representatives of all member states. It might not even mirror all major NATO countries. The precedent for this was the famous Harmel Report of 1967, which was also drafted by a group composed primarily of representatives of smaller NATO countries.

With regard to finalizing the new Strategic Concept, again the Secretary General is in charge. According to the DAS, he will develop the strategy based on the Wise Men's suggestions and will keep the NATO Council “involved throughout the process”. The deadline for the final document is cryptically formulated. It appears to be the next NATO summit in autumn 2010 in Lisbon. Apparently, in order to have some flexibility in case an agreement on the wording of the document cannot be reached, the DAS requires the Secretary General “to submit proposals for its implementation” by the time of the summit in Portugal.

b) Consensus Building

The concept of having a “Wise Men Group” implies a tradeoff with regard to consensus building among all

¹ Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

member states. The smaller the group, the easier it will be to agree on a draft strategy. At the same time, it will be more difficult to obtain the consent of those countries not represented in the group.

To overcome this impediment, the Wise Men are supposed to travel to the NATO capitals in order to take on board national positions and preferences. This holds particularly true for the first phase, which is scheduled as a mind-clearing phase and will continue until late autumn 2009, before the actual drafting process begins. The brainstorming process will also include seminars and workshops with external institutions (think tanks) and partner countries. Inclusion of views from the capitals and from the strategic community at an early stage could help to obtain support in the NATO Council, where all NATO Allies have to agree on the final document.

With regard to approval by all member states, much will depend on the question of whether the new strategy will be an overhauled version of the 1999 Strategic Concept, or whether an at least partly new document will be written. So far, views in NATO on this question differ significantly. Some tend towards a "blank sheet approach" which takes a fresh look at future challenges and roles for the Alliance. The result would be concise strategic guidance, much shorter than the 1999 strategy and tailored to NATO's missions in the 21st century. Others opt for carefully polishing the existing Strategic Concept and just adapting those parts which have been overtaken by events, to keep the contested issues as limited as possible. Some of NATO's key members still seem to be undecided. On the one hand, they even publicly opt for the careful approach of simply polishing the existing strategy; on the other hand they constantly emphasize that NATO needs a "new" Strategic Concept.

The fact that the basic draft of the new strategy will be prepared by a group of external experts, though, is likely to tilt the drafting process more towards a blank sheet approach, as they might be more eager to choose new wordings instead of referring to NATO agreed formulations.

c) Open Questions

Looking at NATO's decision making structures, it is an open question whether the Alliance will be able to agree on a meaningful strategy without major frictions. The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is the principal decision making body in the Alliance. It meets at least once a week at the level of the Permanent Representatives – the NATO Ambassadors. Only at ministerial meetings (both formal and informal) does the NAC convene at the level of foreign or defense ministers. Summit meetings of the NAC (with heads of states and governments) are even less frequent – every one or two years. Thus, ambassadorial level NAC is the managerial body running NATO's day to day business.

The NAC receives military advice from the Military Committee (MC), NATO's senior military authority. Subordinate to the NAC, the MC also plays a key role in developing NATO's military policy and doctrine. In that role, it would be expected to provide an input to all military aspects of the Strategic Concept.

The intended procedure for developing a new NATO strategy, which puts the Secretary General in a leading role, might cause reservations among the Permanent Representatives or the MC. Some caution that a NATO Secretary General is much more a secretary than a general. Regardless of his previous political position, he is dependent on NAC consensus. Even if the Secretary General communicates directly with prime ministers or presidents and has immediate access to the capitals, it will be difficult to sidestep the level of the Permanent Representatives and their subordinate bodies.

It remains to be seen how NATO's decision making structures will cope with this new form of forging the strategic consensus indicated in the DAS.

2. The Purpose

NATO is currently confronted with two detrimental trends. First, over the last two decades it has adopted a number of tasks which were not foreseen in its initial design as a means for Western self determination and self defense

against the Soviet threat. The fact that NATO has evolved from a Eurocentric defense alliance to a global security provider has blurred the lines between the various requirements of security, deterrence, defense or stability. In consequence, there is an urgent need to define NATO's role in the international security environment.

Second, although NATO is currently more active than ever before in its history, the positive attention it receives remains comparably low. The engagement of most publics in member nations in security policy requirements is traditionally limited, and thus it is still difficult to gather political support for providing sufficient resources for military operations. Many governments take the lack of interest of their electorates in defense issues for granted and refrain from any attempt to counter this trend. The consequences can be seen with regard to NATO's engagement in Afghanistan: the less national governments make an effort to explain to their electorate the need for NATO to act far beyond its territorial borders, the more public support for nation building in the Hindu Kush erodes.

A new NATO strategy will have to take on both problems – the specification of the role of the Alliance and the promotion of its existence. To do so, it has to be a hybrid document, addressing the political and military decision making level in NATO as well as the publics inside and outside the Alliance. It has to provide strategic guidance and should be the foundation on which to build public support for security policy needs.

Given these general requirements, the new Strategic Concept will have to fulfill five major tasks.

• Specify NATO's Role

Starting from different assumptions on the threats to transatlantic security, different NATO allies foresee different tasks and missions for NATO in the 21st century. Most of the “old” members recognize NATO's role as a global stability provider, engaged in missions far beyond the geographical borders of the member states. In contrast, most of the “new” members joined the Alliance because of its security commitment in accor-

dance with Article V of the Washington Treaty. In consequence, they highlight the mission of territorial defense. Others – old and new members – stress NATO's role in dealing with new challenges like energy scarcity or climate change. However, many of these exponents fail to define what concrete role NATO can have in coping with these problems.

The new Strategic Concept has to clearly specify NATO's roles and missions. This specification has to be based on the shared perception of threats and challenges in the foreseeable future to permit realistic strategic planning.

• Provide Priorities

Many of NATO's planning documents seem to follow a shopping list approach: a maximum number of requirements are compiled in order to be prepared for all foreseeable contingencies. Given the lack of financial resources in all NATO countries, a strict prioritization of tasks will be inevitable. The international economic crisis will aggravate this problem.

The new Strategic Concept has to provide a hierarchy of requirements in order to bring demands in line with the resources. This hierarchy will imply that elements at the lower end of the spectrum might even be omitted for the benefit of the more relevant ones. On the other hand, clear priorities can function as a benchmark for the performance of NATO members.

However, any prioritization contains the risk of making the wrong choices. Thus, strategy is about identifying and managing risks with a transparent articulation of the shared responsibilities. In turn, prioritization can function as a firewall to requests for new missions which are not sufficiently underpinned either by resources or commitments.

• Re-Engage and Re-Commit

By defining a common vision for NATO, the new Strategic Concept must become a tool for re-engaging and re-committing all NATO member states to the core principles of the Alliance. NATO must not merely be seen as “nice to have” by its members but as the precondition for security and stability in the entire Euro-Atlantic area. This must include the insight that undivided security can only be based on undivided solidarity. Alliance commitments are an obligation, not a choice. They have to be made according to the overall capabilities of the member and must not be confined to symbolic measures. It would be difficult to uphold a situation where some partners of NATO contribute more to Alliance operation than some full members. A new consensus is required to counter the trend of a re-nationalization of foreign, security and defense policy – as currently can be observed in Afghanistan, where the “we” in NATO’s operations is crucially missing.

Forging a strategic consensus might include fierce debates. However, solidarity in an alliance does not necessarily mean harmony among all members.

• Be Forward Oriented

The new Strategy has to be grounded on the previous one but it has to be forward oriented. Just to reconfirm already agreed wording would be insufficient. Moreover, the new strategy should not be an intellectual Maginot Line that only codifies NATO’s “acquis communautaire”. Instead it must reflect political-military discussion in the broadest sense, to avoid strategic surprises.

To do so, strategic adaptation should be seen as a constant process. Therefore, the strategic concept should have a time horizon of significantly less than ten years. Alternatively, NATO documents subsequent to the Strategic Concept could be adapted and modified more frequently.

• Win the Battle of Narratives

NATO’s new strategy must contribute to winning the battle of narratives; internally and externally, which means the domestic audience and the international community. It has to be a public rallying point to gather support, particularly for the military dimension of security. It must be seen as a strategic communications tool, where precision guided messages are as relevant as precision guided munitions. This will be all the more important as many NATO governments fail in (or refrain from) sufficiently communicating the need for foreign and security policy necessities to their electorates.

A first step of a communication strategy could be to develop a clear and unmistakable wording that captures what the aim of the document really is. “Strategic Concept” is a cumbersome term. Why not call it “Strategy” or “Strategic Guidance”?

Furthermore, the attempt to develop a narrative that is appealing to a broader audience might require a “Red Team Approach” – i.e. the inclusion of opinions from outside of NATO. To better understand perceptions and prejudices vis-à-vis transatlantic security, alternative views from other parties (Russia, Islamic countries, non governmental organizations etc.) could be included.

3. The Problems

Even if the work on the new Strategic Concept has not yet started, NATO’s previous discussions hint at a number of topics and questions which will be particularly controversial. None of them can be currently answered but they are likely to dominate strategic debates in the coming months. To mention just a few:

a) NATO and Article V

NATO is a political-military alliance whose key purpose is to provide collective security and collective defense for its

members. Article V of the Washington Treaty encapsulates this duality by implying the right to protect the population, the security interests and the territory of all NATO states.

Contrary to many popular views, Article V is not a “security guarantee”: it does not oblige NATO states to immediately defend their allies militarily. Instead, in the case of an attack, each member is required to take “such action as it deems necessary” to restore the security of the transatlantic area, and military action may be one of the measures.

Despite this flexibility in the wording, NATO’s security commitments had been credible during the cold war. The first Warsaw Pact soldier stepping on NATO’s territory (probably in Germany) would have triggered the Article V mechanism and the military presence of many NATO allies on German soil would have made a concerted military response highly likely.

Today, the meaning of Article V is much more difficult to define. At least four questions require clarification and consensus.

- How to balance NATO’s role in self-defense (Article V) and security (expeditionary operations, stabilization missions)? Is there a tradeoff between both tasks? Can NATO’s mission in Afghanistan really be seen as “Article V at a distance”? Is NATO currently able to defend all NATO territory at any time?
- How to maintain the credibility of Article V? If NATO constantly emphasizes the relevance of defense commitments, how can they be made plausible to allies and to potential aggressors? Is there a need for contingency plans or military exercises that simulate territorial defense scenarios (probably on the territory of NATO’s Eastern members)?
- When does Article V apply? During the cold war, NATO awaited proof that an aggression was under way before its own defense operations

had started. In an age of missile technology proliferation, vital threats may materialize before troops are sent in, for instance when long range missiles tipped with weapons of mass destruction are prepared for launch by potentially hostile regimes. To await the proof of aggressive intentions would mean to wait for the launch of the missile – with hardly any chance of avoiding the deadly consequences. Given these dangers, can NATO shirk from discussing the element of preemption as a means to provide security to its members?

- How to deal with collective self defense against new threats? Article V only defines “armed attacks” as the trigger to commit Allies to mutual assistance. However, attacks against computer networks (cyber attacks), the release of hazardous material or the cutoff of energy supplies can hardly be seen as armed attacks but will still require solidarity and common action. Is there a need to amend the wording of the Washington Treaty?

b) Russia

Closely connected to the question of NATO’s role of both defense and security is the question of how to deal with Russia. This is a major issue in almost all NATO debates. Even the group that drafted the DAS spent a significant part of its discussion on the Russia question.

The dilemma is striking: on the one hand, NATO and Russia are engaged in a unique partnership “at 29” (28 NATO members plus Russia) organized in a special forum, the NATO-Russia Council. On the other hand, a large number of NATO Allies – given their history and geographic location - view Article V as primarily directed against Russia, since there is hardly any other country imaginable that would be able to launch a military attack against NATO territory.

The Georgia crisis in 2008 has worsened the situation. In

the NATO Council there was no unity on how to react to the military escalation. Media in the Baltic States raised the question of how NATO might have reacted if Russia had chosen to take military action in order to “protect” Russian minorities in Estonia or Latvia.

In the meantime, NATO has declared that it will not return to “business as usual” but at the same time that it will re-establish relations between Brussels and Moscow. Hence, it still remains unclear how NATO intends to deal with a partner as important as it is difficult to handle.

Some of the open questions are:

- Shall a lasting relationship between NATO and Russia be primarily based on values or on common interests? Apparently, the popular but hollow term of the “strategic partnership” is not enough to describe the realities of the relationship with Russia. Can NATO as a community of values be engaged in a special partnership, if a common value base is missing?
- How to keep up a close relationship, if Russia’s self-assertiveness (and, in the eyes of some allies, its aggression) increases? Can NATO agree on a common position vis-à-vis Moscow if the historical experiences with Russia differ so widely within the Alliance?
- How much influence on NATO’s decision making can and should be granted to Russia? How to deal with those cases where both sides differ fundamentally (Missile Defense, Enlargement)? Can both sides agree to disagree or will Russia always expect a solution that takes its own positions into account?

c) Nuclear Deterrence

One topic that currently seems to be of secondary interest but is likely to come into the political limelight is the nuclear question.

The reasons for the nuclear renaissance in NATO’s strategic debates are manifold. Iran is actively pursuing a military nuclear program and could so far be stopped neither by the threat of sanctions nor by political or economic incentives offered by the international community. As the pace of Iranian nuclear developments goes on unconstrained, Teheran might be able to conduct a nuclear test explosion soon. This might force other countries in the region to strive for nuclear weapons as well and would catapult questions of nuclear threats and nuclear deterrence high on the political agenda.

A similar situation could emerge in Asia. North Korea, which joined the club of nuclear powers in 2006, is not willing to scrap or return the nuclear devices it has already produced, regardless of its promises to end the nuclear program. Depending on the coming developments, the trend of further nuclear proliferation will increase in this region as well. Pakistan is a particular case in point which could further speed up the dynamics.

These ongoing developments will not only end the recurring pipedreams of a nuclear free world but will also require NATO to reflect more thoroughly about the role of its nuclear capabilities. The 1999 Strategic Concept limited itself to very general statements about the further relevance of nuclear weapons. Today, pertinent questions need to be answered:

- What is the purpose of NATO’s nuclear forces? Against which kind of opponents are they directed? Is there any likely contingency in which they have a role?
- Are NATO’s current nuclear capabilities in line with the deterrence requirements of the 21st century? If not – how to bridge the gap between military hardware and political needs?
- Is the deployment of US nuclear weapons on European soil necessary for the credibility of nuclear commitments or of NATO’s resolve? How might the Eastern European NATO members react to a potential withdrawal of US nuclear forces from Europe?

d) Implications of the Economic Crisis

The mismatch between budgetary requirements for defense and the amount of resources NATO governments are ready to provide has been a constant topic for debate in NATO and within the member states. Voluntary self obligations like the agreement to spend at least two percent of the Gross Domestic Product have been settled but were hardly obeyed by most of the NATO countries. The dispute about the general mismatch and the individual contributions is as old as NATO itself and has been conducted for decades under the heading of “burden sharing”.

The current international financial crisis could add a new dimension to this controversy. Crashing banks, collapsing real estate markets and plummeting industrial production will lead to sharply declining budgets in all NATO countries. In most of them, the consequences for the defense budgets will be disproportionately severe as, for domestic political reasons, social expenditures will be kept as high as possible.

Depending on the severity and the duration of the crisis, defense budgets could suffer such significant cuts that the way the military operates today might be called into question. The debate would no longer be about budgetary fairness and equal commitments, but about how military operations will be conducted in general.

- What if major armament projects that are regarded as crucial for NATO to cope with new challenges (strategic airlift, precision guided weaponry) can no longer be funded – regardless of the pressing need for them?
- What about NATO’s need to take on new risks and challenges beyond its geographical horizon, if the necessary means are not provided?
- Can the concept of the industrialized world, replacing manpower with sophisticated technology (in order to minimize casualties), be upheld?

4. Conclusions

The process leading to a new NATO strategy is in its initial stage. It remains to be seen whether the procedures currently envisioned can sustain the complex grid of NATO’s decision making processes.

In the wake of the fundamental changes in the international security landscape throughout the last decade, the expectations of a new Strategic Concept are very high. Given the wide spectrum of national preferences, regional priorities and political differences among 28 NATO member states, forging consensus will be an extremely demanding task.

NATO might miss its goal of formulating concise, coherent and forward looking strategic guidance that can satisfy political leaders, military planners and public elites at the same time.

The painful process of forging consensus on key strategic positions cannot be avoided. Even if NATO concludes some of the issues only at the lowest common denominator, it is the process, as much as the result, that will count. A true strategic debate on the Alliance’s role has been woefully lacking in NATO over the last ten years. Entering into such a debate will require each member state to clearly define its own positions and priorities and make them transparent. Being accountable for the positions expressed will make free riding more difficult.

A serious and thorough strategic discussion, despite all the dangers of displaying frictions and disunity, can already have a re-committing and re-engaging effect – something that NATO will badly need in the years to come.