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NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept Challenge:

Specificity Versus Flexibility

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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April 2010

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2009, at the NATO Summit held at Strasbourg, France and Kehl, Germany, NATO's Heads of State and Government tasked the Secretary General to develop a new Strategic Concept. Expected to be complete and submitted by the next summit planned for late 2010 in Lisbon, Portugal, it will be the second post-Cold War and first post-9/11 Strategic Concept. Struggling with the meaning of collective defense and deterrence in today's environment and how to confront a broader spectrum of threats, NATO is attempting to codify its role in global civil and military crisis management.¹ Faced with an ever-expanding list of perceived threats, expeditionary military requirements and internal strife, NATO is in the midst of an identity crisis and considered by some as heading towards irrelevancy. Should the 2010 Strategic Concept focus on specific threats and situations warranting action? Or should it return to its core tenets as defined in the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 with the intent of maintaining situational flexibility? These issues are quite substantial given that the Strategic Concept has been the guiding document which provides direction to members on how to organize and equip their respective military forces in response to the "NATO threat(s)."

The aim of this paper is to provide a short background on the evolution of the Strategic Concept in respect to the changing political and military threats to the NATO Alliance. Additionally it will address why the next document needs to return to the core of the alliance and resist the trend of growing specificity in response to the changing security environment. And finally, it will argue the futility of having a strategic document that dictates member military force structure.

BACKGROUND

A cogent consensus amongst NATO members on its role and strategy to deal with the security challenges of its member states is essential if NATO is to remain relevant and effective in the 21st Century. The core NATO document that establishes and addresses both matters is the Strategic Concept. The current Strategic Concept went into effect in 1999. Much has changed in the world since its introduction, to include NATO itself. In 1999 NATO had 19 members versus the current 28, was still Euro-centric, and territorial focused. The airstrikes over Kosovo were ongoing and the events of 9/11 were still two years away.

The fundamental role of NATO is to safeguard the freedom and security of its member countries by political and military means. Created in 1949 in Washington DC, the basis of the alliance is succinctly stated in the North Atlantic Treaty:

The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments.

They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.

They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security.²

The most recognizable element lies in Article 5 of the treaty. It states: "...an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."³ For the following forty years after its inception, this mutual commitment among NATO members was straightforward and unambiguous. The alliance was a collective of member states with shared values united as a deterrent against USSR aggression. However, the "monolithic, massive and potentially immediate threat which was the principal concern of the alliance in its first forty years had disappeared."⁴ Some believed that the need for NATO itself had also disappeared and that future defense spending could be dramatically reduced. Likewise,

many NATO allies cut their defense spending significantly, some by as much as 25 per cent.⁵ On the other hand, a great deal of uncertainty about the future and risks to the security of the alliance were unknown.

In 1991 NATO produced a “New Strategic Concept” defining security threats and the role of NATO in a post-Cold War environment. The 1991 document was a stark departure from previous strategic documents in many ways. Foremost, it was a public document, open for discussion and scrutiny by the general public, governments and journalists. Secondly, it called for an increase in partnerships with more countries, including former adversaries.⁶ While it emphasized that the objective of the alliance remained unchanged, it recognized that future threats were envisioned to be multi-faceted in nature and multi-directional.⁷ Additionally, it alluded to the threats to security in the form of WMD proliferation, energy disruption and terrorism.⁸

The 1990s saw a myriad of political and security developments throughout Europe and the world as a whole. In an effort to confront these new and emerging threats and political challenges, a fundamental shift in NATO’s focus from territorial defense occurred. The Strategic Concept was morphing into a detailed list of things that were, and *could* be threats. The litany of “risks to peace” included: oppression, ethnic conflict, economic distress, the collapse of political order and proliferation of WMD. Under “security challenges and risks”: ethnic and religious rivalries, territorial disputes, inadequate or failed efforts at reform, the abuse of human rights, the dissolution of states, organized crime, non-state actors and cyber attacks.⁹ In addition to these identified risks and threats, it identified NATO’s responsibilities in crisis management and non-Article 5 military response operations such as peace security, peace enforcement, stability and humanitarian operations.

Within the context of the alliance, the events following 11 September 2001 were historic in that NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and extended its assistance to the United States and “marked the beginning of a new impetus in NATO’s transformation process.”¹⁰ In August 2003 NATO assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in its first mission outside of Europe. Examining the success of NATO at the helm of ISAF is not the intent of this paper; however it is reasonable to conclude that its performance and lack of commitment by members have resulted in much criticism and caused many to question the value of NATO as a valuable entity in the 21st Century. As former NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson stated: "The fact is that in Afghanistan we (NATO) can make it work, or we can let it fail...it’s our choice."¹¹

While insisting that Afghanistan was its key priority,¹² the need for a new Strategic Concept was announced at the Strasbourg/ Kehl Summit in April 2009. The demand was in response to “not only the way in which security challenges have evolved, such as the new emphasis on proliferation, failed states, piracy, energy supplies, terrorism and climate change, but also of how NATO has adapted and transformed in the last decade to be able to better tackle these challenges.”¹³

THE DILEMMA

As previously observed, NATO is experiencing an identity crisis. In an effort to remain true to its origin while still maintaining relevancy, it has tried to maintain the elements of cold war era collective territorial defense while acknowledging the challenges of a globalized world with borderless threats. The result has been a shift from a clear understanding of *who* and *what* the threat was, to a confused NATO trying to counter *every* threat against *every* member. To make matters worse, NATO has come to mean different things to different member countries.

Many eastern-Europe countries see a resurgent Russia as a principal security threat and call for a “back to basics” approach to the 2010 Strategic Concept.¹⁴ Others, such as former US Secretary of State, and appointed as the chair of the Group of Experts, Dr. Madeleine Albright, recently claimed that the threat isn’t primarily Russia and that: “other NATO members feel threatened by many of the same lawless forces that concern Russia, including terrorism, violent extremism, the spread of nuclear weapons, drug trafficking and crime.”¹⁵

Clearly, the next Strategic Concept must serve as framework for future operations and convey purpose. However, one of the challenges is the determination of the degree and scope the document must be from the previous version. Despite the uniqueness of each of the prior Strategic Concepts: (post Cold War (1991), pre 9/11 (1999) and post 9/11(2010)) each share commonalities. Each document is reactive to the changing political and security environment, while simultaneously being proactive in an attempt to counter perceived threats to the alliance members. Likewise, each emphasizes that NATO remained true to its core of preserving the security of its territories and populations. Undoubtedly, the 2010 Concept will also emphasize NATO’s core purpose.

A dilemma facing the Group of Experts and ultimately the Secretary General is whether or not to continue the trend of specificity when identifying security threats, risks and circumstances requiring NATO action. Not only are there disagreements as to what constitutes a threat among members, but there may be little advantage and even a potential risk in attempting to quantify and list them in advance.¹⁶

The Strategic Concept is the guiding document for member countries to shape their respective forces, national defense structures and capabilities to meet threats as defined by NATO. As stated by NATO’s Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in 2005: “NATO’s

credibility rests on its cohesion and military competence – its proven ability to foster cooperation between its member nations and to engage them in demanding military operations in regions of vital strategic importance.”¹⁷ Credibility of military forces is directly linked to NATO’s capability to counter the nature of the threat and mission. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated: “We (NATO) need more flexible, mobile and deployable armed forces. If our military is stationary, if our armed forces can’t be moved beyond the borders of each individual member state, the defence of Allied territory will not be effective.”¹⁸ NATO doesn’t possess a military force unto itself, rather it relies on the forces of its members. The reality is that military transformation is cost prohibitive and infeasible for some member states to accomplish.

Additionally, the push for military transformation and reform is nothing particularly unique to the post 9/11 world. A cursory glance of each of the previous Strategic Concepts reveals that each calls for transformation and reforms, especially in the areas of military force structure, organization, training and readiness.

ADDRESSING EVERYTHING ENSURES NOTHING

The trend for detailed specification of circumstances, threats and military structures found in the past Strategic Concepts are more of a hindrance, than a help to NATO and diminish its effectiveness. Like any organization, its “strategic intent” can only be effective through clear and concise guidance. Attempting to identify in advance specific circumstances which may or may not justify invoking Article 5 may result in unnecessary self restraint because it “was not on the list” when in fact it was warranted.

Likewise, as articulated by Edgar Buckley and Ioan Mircea Pascu: “...debating hypothetical situations is notoriously difficult and would likely result in a lowest common

denominator outcome. Such an approach would also carry the twin risks that it would fail to foresee all possible circumstances which might arise and encourage aggressors to frame future attacks to fall short of any newly defined criteria.”¹⁹ NATO would be wise to never underestimate a potential adversary’s ability to use NATO’s own bureaucracy against it.

One of the “hallmarks” of the NATO alliance’s unity is its mandate for consensus among members prior to the approval of decisions. This is a double-edged sword. There are over 4,000 people who work at NATO Headquarters on a full-time basis. Of these, some 2,000 are members of national delegations and supporting staff members of national military representatives to NATO. About 300 people work at the missions of NATO partner countries. 1, 200 are civilian members of the International Staff or NATO agencies located within the Headquarters and about 500 are members of the International Military Staff. With over 300 committees,²⁰ and more than 5,000 meetings that take place every year among NATO bodies²¹ it is amazing to the author that a consensus can be reached on anything at all...let alone on a major international crisis requiring NATO intervention.

The principal decision-making body is the North Atlantic Council. It is responsible for all NATO decisions, regardless of the level of participation of the national representatives attending. “The rule is always one and the same: without the prior approval of each of the twenty eight ambassadors/permanent representatives, nothing can happen in NATO!”²² Effectiveness, flexibility and efficiency are seldom the byproduct of bureaucracy.

SIMPLE AND FLEXIBLE

“Strategy papers alone are unable to bring unity; only their practical implementation can do this.”²³ The fact that countries, like individuals, will invariably “agree to disagree” on various issues does not necessarily mean that compromise is unattainable, in fact that is the essence of

compromise. The more complex and bureaucratic institutions become, the more inflexible and less accommodating they are. Because of this, NATO should return to its founding document, the Washington Treaty, as well as focus on the fundamental security tasks outlined in the revised 1999 document of “Security,” “Consultation”, and “Deterrence and Defense.”²⁴ The writers of the 2010 document must resist the urge to define every situation whether to codify past contingencies or frame future hypothetical situations. The Strategic Concept must serve as a *strategy*...not as a *tactical* “battle plan.” Regardless if the final product is Euro-territorial defense oriented or expeditionary force oriented, successful acceptance and support from alliance members will hinge on its flexibility. It must serve not only the alliance as a whole, but it must be beneficial, feasible and affordable for each member state.

For virtually all member states, defense spending has declined in difficult economic times. Across Europe, total military investment budgets are only about one-third of the US DOD investment budgets. NATO’s best course is to dedicate itself and its members to affordable, low-cost measures that enhance the efficient application of scarce resources.²⁵ Lower military investment does not necessarily have to sacrifice greater military capability and flexibility for the Alliance as a whole...in fact they could potentially be capability multipliers.

On March 3, 2010, the former NATO Secretary General and British Defense Secretary, Lord Robertson went so far as stating that much of the Allies’ current defense budgets are "a pure waste of taxpayer's money." Furthermore he contends that “it’s absurd to spend precious resources building and maintaining large fleets of weapons created to fight a peer competitor that no longer exists....it makes sense to figure out what the various NATO states *can* contribute operationally.”²⁶ The 2006 Riga Summit called for improved capabilities for new expeditionary missions and issued the Comprehensive Political Guidance (CPG).²⁷ The CPG clearly detailed

how NATO forces and capabilities needed to improve. However, the reality is that few of the alliance members have, or will have any time soon, the military capacity to conduct operations on-par with the US or Britain. Any mandate in the next Strategic Concept requiring specific force structures would be counterproductive. Instead of more debates, meetings and summits demanding adherence to the CPG, or calling for more member contributions, "it's time to find a new mechanism."²⁸

That mechanism should be the understanding that the Strategic Concept should be a simple and flexible framework which enables countries to contribute in ways that are politically, culturally and military suited to their capability and will. It should be broad and general in nature and serve as a reference...not as doctrine. However frustrating it may be that the burden will never be distributed evenly, it "beats the present alternative (think ISAF) of pseudo participation with caveats that render the forces useless to the operational commander."²⁹ A comprehensive approach to the next document should mirror membership expectations to member country capabilities. Otherwise the Alliance might persist as a political organization but its effectiveness and credibility will diminish to the point where deterrence is no longer credible.³⁰

CONCLUSION

For 40 years after its inception, NATO's mission was straightforward, understood by each member and unambiguous. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been pursuing defense reforms in order to justify its relevance. In an effort to appear inclusive, unbiased and transparent, the Secretary General appointed a "Group of Experts" (similar to the Three Wise Men³¹) external to the organization, to collect and analyze inputs, draw conclusions and submit critical recommendations. Touted as the most inclusive process to date, NATO insists it will

even seriously consider the opinions provided on these issues even by common citizens.³²

Clearly, NATO recognizes there is a drastic need for change.

NATO leaders have repeatedly stated that collective defense, the transatlantic link, the indivisibility of Allied security and NATO solidarity are, and will remain, key principles which guide the work of the organization.³³ That so much is agreed upon, and it will undoubtedly be the bedrock of the 2010 Strategic Concept. When NATO aims to encompass all emerging threats in a volatile security environment, the further it strays from its core purpose. This results in diverging interpretations of collective defense among member countries. To make matters worse, NATO is often seen to be too slow, lumbering and under-performing. However some argue that these problems reflect “underlying political disagreement and under-investment rather than inefficiencies in the decision processes.”³⁴

If NATO is to survive as a relevant and credible institution, the Strategic Concept must actually *be* strategic, simple and flexible. The Group of Experts must refrain from the notion that simply adding a litany of new security threats equates to a “new” Strategic Concept. Likewise they should avoid inserting military organization and capability mandates. The more it attempts to define specific threats and criteria for NATO involvement, the less commitment and member unanimity there will be.

Despite its daunting bureaucracy, NATO has the capacity to shape the environment in an increasingly unpredictable world. It possesses “defense diplomacy” and is similar to the US military’s “phase zero” of a campaign.³⁵ By strengthening democracies, promoting economic growth, and providing appropriate military assistance, NATO can prevent conflict from ever breaking out.³⁶ NATO needs to capitalize on its strength as an entity for collaborative diplomacy...not kinetic action.

¹ Col David Julazadeh, (Military Advisor to Secretary of Defense Representative in Europe), interview with the author, 16 March 2010.

² *North Atlantic Treaty*, 4 April 1949, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

³ Ibid

⁴ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council*, 7-8 Nov 1991,

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23847.htm, part 1, sec 5.

⁵ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *NATO in the 21st Century*, (Brussels, Belgium), <http://www.nato-bookshop.org/index.php?inc=languages&idpub=2&orderby=browse&taal=ENG>, (accessed 30 Mar 2010), 8.

⁶ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *NATO Handbook Edition 2005-2006*, (Brussels, Belgium, 2006), <http://www.nato-bookshop.org/index.php?inc=languages&idpub=62&orderby=zoeken&taal=ENG>, (accessed 2 Apr 2010), 18.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 1991*, 4.

⁹ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept, Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D. C. on 23rd and 24th April 1999*, (Brussels, Belgium, 1999), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm?selectedLocale=en; (accessed 3 Apr 2010), part 2, sect 23.

¹⁰ *NATO Handbook 2005-2006*, 20.

¹¹ Lord George Robertson, "NATO on Edge of a Precipice," *The Atlantic Council*, 03 Mar 2010, http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/lord-robertson-nato-edge-precipice (accessed 04 Mar 2010).

¹² NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "NATO at 60: Core Values, New Strategic Thinking and the Way Ahead," *NATO After Strasbourg-Kehl*, (Brussels, Belgium, 4 Apr 2009), http://www.nato.int/ebookshop/nato_after_strass-kehl/after_strassbourg_kehl_en.pdf, (accessed 17 Mar 2010).

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¹⁴ Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, "Come Home, NATO? The Atlantic Alliance's New Strategic Concept", *Danish Institute for International Studies*, (April 2009), http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Reports2009/DIIS_report_200904_RingmoseRynning_NATO_web.pdf, (accessed 3 Apr 2010), 18.

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¹⁶ Edgar Buckley & Ioan Mircea Pascu, "Article 5 and Strategic Reassurance," *The Atlantic Council* (Feb 2010), http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/Article5_SAGIssueBrief.PDF, (accessed 28 Mar 2010), 2.

¹⁷ Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "Examining NATO's Transformation," *NATO Review*, (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Brussels, Belgium, 2005) http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2005/transform/transform_en.pdf, (accessed 2 Apr 2010), 3.

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