



ATLANTIC COUNCIL

IDEAS. INFLUENCE. IMPACT.

NATO in Crisis?

Written Statement by Kori Schake

One of the very best historians of the NATO alliance, Stanley Sloan, used to say that the most predictable refrain in the West was that NATO is in crisis. Persuading ourselves that the Alliance is in crisis is how we motivate ourselves to fix problems that emerge. And problems always emerge, not because NATO is in crisis, but because the nature of the threats we address changes with time, and the partnership we have forged in NATO is deep and enduring. NATO has become the means by which the twenty-eight countries that constitute its membership manage their collective security.

Yes, NATO has shortcomings—they are numerous. It fails to address many security problems. Currently it is avoiding tackling cyber threats, even though a NATO ally has been the victim of a cyber attack. It talks too little about emergent threats like Iran. It has only barely overcome the tendency to indulge in theoretical debates the medieval Catholic Church would marvel at for pointlessness. It has not prevented the slide in defense spending by most of its members.

But that does not mean NATO is in crisis, going out of business, in desperate need of a new formula for burden-sharing, or irrelevant. Because the basic NATO bargain remains sound: the United States wants Europe secure and Europe wants American involvement in its security. It was true in 1949, and it is true now.

In fact, the NATO bargain has dramatically expanded to the benefit of the United States in the past twenty years. With the end of the Cold War, many on both sides of the Atlantic questioned whether NATO remained necessary. The German government seemed willing to trade its NATO membership for reunification, the French eager to replace NATO with a solely European defense, and the Russians ambitious to parallel the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact with removing the United States from Europe.

But instead of dissolving, NATO allies persuaded themselves their security against all threats, not just the Soviet threat, was the purpose of the Alliance. This expansion of the mandate was clearly beyond the original intent of the Washington Treaty. The framers that would be most surprised by today's NATO would be its American fathers. The treaty describes the area of application because the United States refused to underwrite the colonial claims of its European allies. We not only refused in principle, we refused in practice: President Eisenhower materially impeded Britain and France's effort in the 1956 Suez war.

Wars in the Balkans were the first test of NATO's broader vision of its security. The alliance passed, if just barely: the time we took persuading ourselves to intervene allowed brutality to take hold in the unraveling of Yugoslavia, the means by which we intervened was subject to ideological rigidities that reduced our military effectiveness and exasperated our politicians with each other. But the alliance was working through an understanding of a whole new kind of mission set, determining whether

and how the practices that govern NATO would be applied beyond the NATO area. Europeans seemed to predominantly want subjugation of NATO to other international institutions; the United States questioned why the influence Europeans have over the United States in NATO should be extended to wars that would not be fought on the territory of European countries.

For all the acrimony of those debates, the alliance did negotiate its way through to a sensible and politically stable new pattern of cooperation. NATO got past the doctrinal impasse over whether NATO was “*An* essential pillar of European security” or “*the* essential pillar of European security.” Foolish as it sounds, the alliance spent six months on that issue when it crafted its 1991 Alliance Strategic Concept. But tiresome debates on these kinds of issues are the way NATO builds a collective approach to problems. That actually is what NATO does. And it’s incredibly important, because those internal negotiations are what make our political commitments in NATO durable. We argue each other to a common understanding.

If the framers would be surprised by the expansion of NATO’s mandate, they would be deeply gratified that the result of the new mandate would be Europeans allies demonstrating their willingness to defend the territory of the United States and Canada, and fight alongside us in wars far beyond Europe. They would be amazed to know the first invocation of NATO’s Article 5 guarantee—that an attack on one would be considered an attack on all—came in response to an attack on the United States.

NATO’s framers were signing up to commit American power to defend Europe; they had no real expectation that European military forces would be called on to defend the United States. And yet, they did. Not only did NATO invoke its mutual defense clause on September 12, 2001, NATO countries also led the effort to bring other countries and international institutions into alignment supporting the United States at a time when the American government was in shock and focused on preventing other attacks. That, too, is an important benefit for the United States of the NATO Alliance: our allies see what is in our interests even when we might not, and they work to help us.

Surely that help would come from some, even from many, NATO allies bilaterally. For the United States, it is often easier to work bilaterally, especially when considering military action beyond Europe. We have military commands organized and involved in operations all over the world, with experience working closely with the countries in which operations occur. To suggest (as many NATO advocates did in 2001) that a war in Afghanistan should be run by the European commander strikes Americans as unreasonable. But it is illustrative that ten years into the war in Afghanistan, the ISAF commander is the NATO commander, it is NATO allies that remain the main force contributors, it is NATO governments that hold the strategy together when setbacks occur or domestic politics buffet a contributing country, and it is NATO’s integrated military command that ensures contributing forces have the organization and training and equipment to be interoperable.

One last advantage of NATO is that it provides a legitimating stamp of approval for the use of military force. We disagree both among allies and within governments about the need for legitimization—the Obama administration is currently in hot water with this legislative body about its stated belief that approval from international institutions is necessary, but approval from Congress is not—but it is clearly preferable to have an institutional mandate where possible. And for Americans, having NATO allies agree to fight alongside us probably matters more than approval from any other international organization. We are less persuaded than other countries that the United Nations is virtuous; we know NATO is because it is comprised of democratic governments

whose values, as well as their interests, drive their policies, and both their values and their interests are in large measure aligned with our own.

That is why NATO isn't actually in crisis, why it doesn't really matter what the Chicago summit concludes about "smart defense," or expanding membership, or command restructuring, or negotiating proposals for limiting tactical nuclear weapons. We should do those things, of course. They are the sinew of Alliance management, the continual adjustment of our activity to the threats and opportunities we face. But we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that NATO is actually doing very well. Prospering, even. It has made the crucial realignment to the end of the Cold War and established a strong foundation for the future of security cooperation and operational effectiveness among its members.

To conclude, I'd like to briefly discuss two areas likely to get significant attention at the summit: the capability gap and nuclear forces. In both areas over-heated rhetoric has the potential to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Capability Gap

We in NATO spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about the capability gap between the military forces of our European allies and those of the United States. It's a serious subject, and the cause of difficulties in functional interoperability and risk sharing. Interoperability is always a challenge. But in our concern about the interoperability gap between Europe and the United States, we often overlook an even more important capability gap: that between Europe and any country our allies would be fighting against. That is the more important comparison. Our NATO allies have a war winning advantage against anyone they would conceivably fight.

They may not be able to fight wars in the ways we would fight them. And these differences have consequences for the risk allies run, both individually and collectively. But we are very near persuading ourselves that nothing can be done unless it is done the way American military forces would, and that is both wrong and dangerous.

Libya operation exemplifies this: in an operation, in which the United States did not want to lead or play a major role, it fired nearly all of the cruise missiles that destroyed Libya's air defenses in advance of allied strike missions, provided the great majority of the aerial tankers and nearly all of the surveillance and electronic warfare elements on which allied flights depended, flew 25 percent of all sorties, rushed precision munitions to allies, and loaned officers trained at identifying military targets to NATO headquarters.

Without American support, the Libya operation could not have been fought in the way that it was; but that does not mean that it could not have been fought at all. Can anyone really doubt that the military forces of Britain, France, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Canada, Spain, the Netherlands, Turkey, Greece, and Romania could force the capitulation of a dictator who was fighting a domestic insurrection? Muammar Qaddafi spent \$1 billion a year on his military, most of that badly; Britain alone spends \$45 billion and well.

Twenty years of fretting about capability gaps is persuading us that Europe can do little militarily without that United States, and that is fundamentally untrue. It is also corrosive to the willingness of Europeans to use military force. The United States needs capable European allies. We have capable

European allies. Denigrating their ability to fight affects their willingness to fight. There are many problems on the horizon with which military force will be important in contending, and the United States should be encouraging our European allies and setting them up to be successful.

Nuclear Forces

There is a strong tendency to avoid discussing nuclear weapons and their role in NATO strategy. Political leaders in both Europe and the United States hesitate to argue the need for use of weapons that devastate large areas, kill indiscriminately, and raise difficult questions of proportionality. But NATO has a great story to tell about its management of nuclear strategy and forces. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has unilaterally reduced its nuclear weapons by 90 percent. It has had three rounds of reviewing its strategy, and in each instance reaffirmed the importance of nuclear deterrence in preventing war. In the past two years, NATO government have persuaded themselves anew of the importance of NATO allies sharing in the risks associated with nuclear missions and the stationing of nuclear forces in Europe.

The Russians maintain a stockpile of deliverable tactical nuclear weapons more than ten times NATO's, and continue to deploy those weapons predominantly west of the Ural Mountains. Their military doctrine increasingly emphasizes nuclear weapons as a substitute for the crumbling capability of their conventional military forces, and they are unresponsive to overtures for negotiated reductions and increased transparency. While Russia is no longer the main driver of NATO defense plans and activity, the Alliance yet has work to do on old-fashioned Article 5 threats like Russian nuclear weapons because Russia's truculence continues to be a threat to us all.

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