

**Karl-Heinz Kamp** is Research Director at the NATO Defense College in Rome. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author alone.

## NATO's Need for Partnership and Cooperation

Karl-Heinz Kamp

Politicians in Asia, Africa or Latin America frequently tend to perceive the Atlantic Alliance with a note of skepticism. Once founded to counter the threat posed by the Communist Warsaw Pact, the Alliance is still around even though the Soviet menace has been long gone. Instead of dissolving itself as well, NATO has evolved over the years to cope with the post-Cold War security environment. It has taken up new members and the number of further applicants is still growing. It has adopted a global horizon and is currently militarily active on three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia). It has expanded its portfolio and is today addressing a number of security challenges beyond pure military self-defense. Finally, NATO has progressed from an institution in a readiness mode to deter a threat from the East to a military active body that has fought wars from the Balkans to Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Some critics therefore suspect that NATO might be nothing less than the United States' string puppet to support Washington's global (or even imperialistic) strategies. Others regard the Alliance as the means to defend the interests of its members with military means in an offensive or even aggressive manner. Or worse – NATO appears to be the tool of "The West" to guarantee its supremacy on the international stage.

Even benevolent observers wonder why NATO still exists and even became the most successful political-military alliance in modern history. The Alliance interacts with a large number of partner countries all

around the globe and has adopted a global horizon. This mystery raises three intertwined questions:

- › First, why does NATO still exist?
- › Second, what are future challenges for the Alliance?
- › Third, why are partnerships particularly important for NATO to preserve its role in an international environment with rising powers and rapidly changing gravity fields?

## **Why Does the Transatlantic Alliance Exist Today?**

A simplistic answer to the question of why NATO still exists would be that its 28 members want it to exist. NATO nations perceive the option of organizing their security policy in a cooperative way and incorporating their forces in an integrated military structure as more profitable and advantageous than providing their security on a purely national basis. For this advantage they are prepared to cede national sovereignty and to bow to Alliance consensus – in this context, large nations like the United States, France or the United Kingdom accept a veto by Belgium or Estonia.

A more sophisticated answer, though, would have to embrace the special character of NATO as a Euro-Atlantic alliance where the leading power, United States, is – together with Canada - separated by 6000 kilometers of Atlantic Ocean from their 26 European allies. What are the common interests in Europe and North America to keep the transatlantic link stable even without a unifying threat as the Soviet Union once was?

Surprising to many, this transatlantic nexus is still valid and persuasive even six decades after NATO had been founded and more than two decades after the Eastern Block crumbled. Skeptics tend to point out that, with the generational changes on both sides of the Atlantic, the positive connotations of European-American friendship and the support for a transatlantic security alliance might fade away. In addition, it is sometimes claimed that NATO is being eroded by dwindling financial resources and increasing transatlantic debates over military spending, commitments and burden sharing. According to such a view, the US is becoming increasingly unwilling - and unable - to pay for the military shortcomings of their European allies.

Yet, the almost too frequent NATO quarrel about burden sharing misses one crucial point: nations join and keep up an alliance not for altruistic reasons or because of nostalgia, but to serve their interests. Europe and North America don't invest in NATO to please each other, but because the mutual benefits outweigh the investments. NATO was founded and kept up during the Cold War because it was advantageous for both sides of the Atlantic. The US provided protection for Europe, whereas the European allies in turn guaranteed Washington's influence in Europe. Such a transatlantic bargain still exists, in a slightly different perspective. Through NATO, the US guarantees its influence in today's Europe – a continent which is stable, prosperous (despite the Euro crisis), benign and, above all, politically likeminded. No other region in the world combines these attributes in a similar manner, and no other continent is open to such a strong US voice in its own affairs. Moreover, the European NATO members, all committed to transatlantic values and all solid democracies (even if some South Eastern European allies have

to further mature in that respect), can provide political legitimacy for military actions conducted by the US beyond its own borders. Lastly, Europe remains a logistical hub for global US military operations.

Europe, in turn, benefits from the transatlantic security partnership in at least three respects. The US still provides military protection (with conventional as well as nuclear forces) – a benefit which is of tremendous importance for many Eastern European NATO members as they still harbor concerns in regard to Russia. In addition, the US protects the global commons, for instance sea lines of communication or unlimited access to air and space. Finally, the US is a decisive power of the global order and stabilizes regions which are important for the European allies. Thus, for both sides of the Atlantic, membership in NATO means benefit sharing rather than burden sharing.

## Challenges for NATO

Despite the fundamental agreement on the core value of NATO, there is a number of political trends around which are likely to strain NATO's cohesion and might even turn into concrete security challenges. Eight of these developments are particularly noteworthy, since they entail considerable potential for transatlantic friction and/or are largely underrepresented in the debates on NATO's future: the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the financial crisis, instability in Europe, rebellion in the Arab world, the spread of nuclear weapons, Washington's reorientation to the Asian-Pacific region, the worsening relationship with Russia and the shale gas revolution.

The first trend or development that will significantly affect NATO in the coming years is the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Alliance members have been fighting on the Hindu Kush for more than twice the duration of the Second World War. Their national defense planning, a major part of their threat perceptions and many decisions on the procurement of military equipment have been strongly geared towards Afghanistan. NATO's partnership policy, meaning its construction of a network of countries which cannot (or do not want to) become members but support NATO's activities, has also been determined to a considerable extent by the requirements in Afghanistan. Ending its largest ever combat mission is therefore bound to have a profound impact on the Alliance's strategic direction: NATO after 2014 will look different from the Alliance as it has evolved since the 9/11 attacks – probably not fundamentally, but significantly.

The second key development is the fact that the transatlantic community is experiencing a financial crisis which, particularly with respect to Europe, differs in at least three ways from economic recessions of the past. First, it is unique in its order of magnitude. Second, this crisis is different in that it has managed to hit NATO's "big spenders", those members who in the past were able to continue investing significantly in their armed forces even during periods of economic downturn. Third, the current crisis is not predictable in its duration. Indeed, for the "problem-countries" in the south of Europe it might take decades until balanced national budgets can be achieved. Some are already speaking about the need to face a new "Thirty Years' War".

For the United States too, the financial problems are severe. However, favorable demographic conditions (higher birth rate, lower average age, immigration) should enable the US to bottom out more rapidly. In many European countries, though, ageing societies, neglected structural reform of the welfare state and accumulated debts add up to a severe obstruction to economic growth. As a result, despite political rhetoric, there is not the slightest chance for higher defense expenditures in any major NATO member state. Deep cuts in NATO's military capabilities will be inevitable.

A third, particularly worrisome tendency stemming from the financial crisis is the danger of regional instability within NATO itself. Drastic austerity measures in those countries which have so far lived beyond their means might destabilize entire societies and render states ungovernable. The current outburst of violence and chaos in Greece could merely prove the harbinger for other countries in the south of Europe. Irrespective of whether mass unemployment and lack of prospects (particularly among the young) are self-inflicted or not, they will determine daily life in these regions. It is highly unlikely that electors will consistently vote as reason dictates and accept that policies must focus on the objective needs of economic recovery. Instead, nationalist or xenophobic movements will probably gain ground and, again, Greece can be seen as a precursor. Ideologists with simple answers for complex questions will come to the fore, looking for scapegoats outside their own countries on whom they can conveniently blame self-inflicted problems. As a result, domestic violence could spread over national borders, leading to regional crises and tensions among neighbors. The danger of a "Balkanization" of southern Europe might not be an overstatement, given that for the time being many austerity measures have merely been announced or approved but their full implementation is still to come.

Fourth, a looming challenge for transatlantic relations is posed by developments in the Arab world. Notwithstanding NATO's successful Libya operation, the entire MENA region (Middle East and Northern Africa) remains highly volatile. Even if what has been called the "Arab Spring" increasingly seems to be turning into an "Islamic Winter" in which religious dogmatism and societal deadlock prevail, developments have far from run their course. Further uprisings or violent protests will surely occur. Despite the already mentioned risk-consciousness of military decision-makers, Libya has set a precedent. Thus, the public in many NATO countries might cause political pressure by demanding military action in response to media exposure of unrestrained cruelty against civilians – Syria is an example. In such cases the Alliance will always be confronted with the painful debate about whether and when an intervention would be prudent, and who is going to contribute to such a mission.

Geographically linked to events in the Arab world is a fifth problematic development for the transatlantic community, namely Iran's effort to develop nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran could strain transatlantic cohesion in four ways. First, it would revitalize the debate in NATO on the future role of nuclear weapons and the credibility of US deterrence commitments for European members of the Alliance. Ideas of nuclear reductions championed in some NATO capitals might come to a halt. Second, should Washington take, support or endorse military action to prevent Iran from going nuclear, a fierce and

divisive debate within NATO on the legitimacy of such a step is likely to follow. Third, given that Iran shares a border with Turkey, any severe crisis could escalate to an Article 5 case<sup>1</sup>, challenging the Alliance with sharp controversy about commitments and contributions. Fourth, even a non-Article 5 escalation, for instance in the event of Iran blocking the Strait of Hormuz, would confront NATO with painful decisions on how to react collectively to such a vital threat.

The sixth major trend to highlight is Washington's frequently mentioned "pivot" or "rebalancing" towards the Asia-Pacific region. Despite its prominence, this trend seems less worrisome for the Euro-Atlantic community. The shift of US attention away from Europe does not devalue the American engagement in NATO, but is a logical consequence of the geostrategic changes of recent years. The list of unfinished business in Europe is becoming constantly smaller, whereas the rise of China and India requires a stronger US presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Most NATO members understand this need and appreciate that Europe remains the largest stationing ground for US forces abroad. Still, the American shift will be accompanied by less US enthusiasm for European affairs and a stronger concentration on domestic issues – something the Alliance will have to cope with. Despite a number of symbolic resets, a seventh trend confronting the Alliance is a constant worsening of the NATO-Russia relationship. Missile defense cooperation remains controversial because of irreconcilable positions on both sides. NATO's Eastern member states still harbor concerns about Russia. In turn, Moscow's often harsh words and behavior vis-à-vis its neighbors or former allies are hardly likely to alleviate historical worries. On the international scene, particularly in the MENA region, Russia has lost much of its former influence and seems to be limiting its policy to sheer obstructionism. Most importantly, with regard to its economic, military and societal modernization, Russia has lost ground and is currently occupying an international position lagging well behind its pretensions of being at eye level with NATO. As the gap between aspirations and realities in Russia is likely to widen, the leadership in Moscow might feel tempted to compensate what seems to be a hidden inferiority complex by showing even more confrontational behavior vis-à-vis NATO. This would spark recurrent debates in NATO about who is to blame for having lost constructive contact with Russia, and how to bring Moscow back towards a more cooperative attitude.

Eighth, there seem to be almost radical developments in the energy sector. Even if the so-called "shale gas revolution" proves to be at least partly based on hype, the impact of the availability of unconventional sources of energy (shale gas, oil sands) will have a profound impact on international politics. North America is on its way to self-sufficiency with regard to oil and gas – US companies have to pay only a third as much for electricity as their European competitors. Israel will move from 100 percent dependency on energy imports to 70 percent self-supply. China, India and Ukraine will exploit their shale gas resources, even if the ecological consequences are still not fully predictable. Western European countries will follow as soon as ecologically acceptable technologies are available. These developments will have grave consequences for current gas suppliers

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<sup>1</sup> Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (the NATO Treaty) obliges all NATO states to regard an attack on one member as an attack on all.

like Russia or the Gulf countries. They will certainly remain capable of selling their oil and gas for acceptable prices on the international energy markets – not least because of the rising energy demand in Asia. However, the international influence they command as a result of being able to use energy as a means for intimidation or even blackmail will be significantly reduced.

## NATO's Way Ahead and the Future of Partnerships

These eight trends will influence NATO in various ways and are likely to lead to four consequences for the Alliance – not all of them negative.

One outcome will be that NATO will gradually lose relevance as its military forces will be shrinking significantly. Given the budget cuts in all NATO countries and associated trends like the so called sequestration in the United States (the quasi-automatic budget cuts), there is no alternative to severe military downsizing. NATO a decade from now will have significantly fewer standing military forces and far more reserves. More cooperation and rationalization among Alliance members might help to alleviate the consequences of shrinking defense budgets – NATO's efforts in this direction are known as “Smart Defense”. However, initiatives towards pooling and sharing of scarce resources or common procurement of costly military goods will not make up the shortfall in funds as a result of cuts.

A second consequence of some of the trends mentioned above will be that NATO's military leaders are likely to become even more risk-conscious when it comes to military operations going beyond self-defense or the preservation of vital interests. In the light of shrinking budgets and the experience in recent operations from Afghanistan to Libya, they might advise against military interventions to protect civilians or to stabilize regions outside of Europe when asked by their political masters to assess future actions. The situation in Syria, where today's civilian death toll is already significantly higher than on the eve of the intervention in Libya, is a case in point. Individual nations might act against the Assad regime – NATO as an institution will not. Instead, if there is to be any likelihood of NATO acting militarily in response to humanitarian requirements, key interests of Alliance members must be at stake. NATO cannot simply be the default option in international crises or civil war situations, automatically responding to popular demand that “something” be done. In addition, as past experience has shown, those who are quickest to demand the intervention of the “international community” (and, in particular, NATO) in crisis regions are also likely to complain about military operations taking their toll in civilian casualties.

Thirdly, the overall tendency towards shrinking defense budgets might even have a positive impact on the Alliance in the sense that NATO's classic function – executing swift and decisive military action together with others – is likely to increase in importance. Since the impact of austerity extends for the first time to the “big spenders” in NATO, a key consequence will be that no NATO ally – with the sole exception of the United States – will any longer be able to execute significant military operations on its own.

Should there be a need to use military force, France, the UK and others will face the alternative of either acting in the framework of NATO or not acting militarily at all. Even a coalition of the willing, composed of NATO and non-NATO countries, will hardly be able to execute a major military intervention without recourse to NATO, and thus ultimately to US military capabilities. This will mean that NATO will increasingly assume the function of the “enabler” or “facilitator” for common military action outside the Alliance’s geographical borders and beyond Article 5 missions, even if the general appetite for military crisis management is on the decline. Playing an enabler role of this sort will certainly increase cohesion of NATO in the years to come.

Fourth – and this is crucial – NATO will increase its partnership efforts, which means cooperation with non-member countries in Europe and beyond. NATO’s partnership policy is a true success story, as close cooperation with other countries and institutions is beneficial for partners as well as for NATO members. Partners profit from NATO’s expertise in common military planning, procurement, training and operations. Thus, many partners are particularly interested in military cooperation with NATO, in order to familiarize themselves with the procedures, standards and norms of an integrated military structure which is widely regarded as the international “gold standard”. NATO in turn profits from partnerships at least in three respects: First, NATO can receive military and financial support from partners for its crisis management operations. For instance, 22 countries contribute to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Second, through partnerships, NATO can have a say in certain regions and at least try to affect political developments with a view to defusing crisis situations or easing tensions. Even if this influence depends on the situation and cannot be guaranteed, it can be an important element of preventive security policy. Third, through training and military assistance, NATO as a multinational enabler can empower partner countries to take care of their own regional security and to intervene, if needed, in crisis situations on their doorstep. Empowerment of this kind can reduce the pressure on NATO to use its own forces for out-of-area crises.

However, in a globalized world with new power centers, new players and volatile threat environment, the partnership idea has to be evolved along the lines of key insights which emerged from the experiences of the recent years.

- › Geography is no longer a guiding principle for NATO partnerships. Partners in Europe are not per se more relevant than those outside the Euro-Atlantic area. Thus, the fact that NATO cultivates global partnerships does not imply any NATO ambition to have a global role or to function as world police. Rather, it pays tribute to the fact that geographic distance gets ever less relevant in any risk analysis. Instead, different countries in different regions could face an identical challenge (like cyber attacks or terrorism) and could partner with NATO accordingly.
- › The political system of partner countries counts. NATO is a community of values. Its members all abide by the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. This means that other countries sharing these principles should be given priority for partnership, not merely in relation to questions of values but also in terms of practical cooperation. Sharing sensitive information is easier, in actual practice, among

politically like-minded partners. The same holds true for military cooperation among countries with firm civilian control of their armed forces. While this does not preclude fruitful cooperation with non-democratic countries, politically like-minded partners should nevertheless be given special consideration.

- › Therefore, partnership cannot be free of hierarchies. Not all partners are equal and not all partners are equally important from NATO's point of view. Countries which contribute extensively to Alliance missions (referred to, in NATO parlance, as "heavy partners") deserve and demand particular attention. The same holds true for politically like-minded countries. However, neither of these criteria is sufficient in itself to justify special importance as a partner. What constitutes privileged partnership status is the combination of fully sharing NATO's values and contributing to its missions. This is consistent with the expectations of close partners, and places a premium on a political as opposed to a technical approach to partnership.
- › Privileged partners need to have a voice in NATO. In exchange for their support for NATO, politically like-minded partners should not merely have a say regarding the specific operation they are contributing to. They should also be put in a position where they can contribute to NATO deliberations on a broad range of security issues. With security challenges no longer limited to certain regions, the interests of democracies everywhere overlap considerably. This needs to be reflected in discussions between NATO members and partners.
- › There has to be a level below formal partnerships. There are countries which have an interest in cooperating with NATO but hesitate to join any formal partnership agreement, let alone contribute to NATO operations. The Alliance needs to leave itself scope for informal dialogue with these countries (as already happens on an occasional basis). One example would be China, a country that has approached NATO about establishing contacts. In the meantime, staff talks between high-level Chinese and NATO military have taken place in Beijing; it remains to be seen how these relations will continue to develop.<sup>2</sup> India is another important country with which dialogue has started; however, New Delhi still seems very hesitant to engage. Nevertheless, both countries are too important for the Alliance (and vice versa) to be left without the prospect of closer cooperation.

In the light of the above considerations, a new partnership model should be developed which consists of three categories: Advanced Partners, Cooperation Partners and Dialogue Countries.

The Advanced Partners – NATO's partners of choice – would constitute the politically closest circle around the Alliance. It would include the countries which want to engage in partnership with NATO, are politically like-minded (i.e. fully developed Western-style democracies), and are willing and able to contribute to operations. A group of countries fulfilling these three requirements should be included in NATO's debates and consultations on a regular basis, covering a wide range of security issues of common interest. For this purpose, a special forum should be created and convene with the North Atlantic Council (NAC) – NATO's main decision making body - on a regular basis. Of

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<sup>2</sup> China provides a ship for the anti-piracy mission off the Horn of Africa. Even if this is strictly national support with no subordination to a NATO or EU command, China takes part in the so called "de-confliction meetings" with all other contributors.

course, these privileged or Advanced Partners could only affect the Alliance's decision-shaping, while the classical decision-making would be the preserve of NATO members in NAC meetings. Invitations to join the APC would be subject to the unanimous consent of all NATO member states, and geography would not be taken into account: Austria and Australia, for example, would be considered equally eligible.

The second group would be Cooperation Partners countries actively interested in partnership and in cooperating with NATO, to the mutual benefit of both sides, in certain areas of common concern. Contributions to NATO operations would be desirable but not indispensable. For instance, NATO might agree to provide military education for a partner's armed forces, irrespective of whether the country concerned would be willing or able to involve them in a NATO mission.

The essential difference between these two innermost circles of partners is that the first, the advanced group would be limited to politically like-minded countries and benefit from regular consultations beyond the area of immediate cooperation. In addition, membership of this group would not be limited to the time frame of a certain project or activities – it would continue, unless specifically revoked by NATO and the partner countries.

Finally, the third circle would be made up of the Dialogue Countries: while interested in an exchange with NATO, these would essentially be an unknown quantity with regard to any subsequent scope for cooperation. China and India have been mentioned, South American countries like Brazil could be candidates as well, provided they show an interest. A dialogue with these countries would be intended first and foremost to correct mutual misperceptions and build trust. This could help to alleviate the initially mentioned skepticism NATO is still facing in parts of the world.

With such a setup which takes note of the various levels of interest and readiness in other countries to partner with NATO, the Alliance will be prepared not only to preserve the security and the vital interests of its members but also to function as one element in the institutional toolbox for international stability.