



NO. 86
December 2010



FACTS & FINDINGS



NATO's Self-Assurance: The New Strategic Concept

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At their summit meeting in Lisbon on November 19 and 20, the heads of state and government of NATO's 28 member states agreed on a new strategic concept. The document, titled "Active Engagement, Modern Defence", is meant to both demonstrate and strengthen the political and strategic consensus within the Alliance. Moreover, with regard to NATO's future tasks, it is meant to provide orientation. It is the first of its kind since 1999, and thus NATO's first encompassing basic policy document reflecting the experiences of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the international financial and economic crisis. This analysis presents the strategic concept's most important elements and comments on their political significance.

*Originally published on November 21st, 2010.
Translated from the German by Christiane R uth.*

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I. PROCESS

The new strategic concept was developed in a quite unusual way. The concepts of 1991 and 1999 had been drafted within NATO's bureaucracy and/or in tough negotiations within the NATO council. During the Cold War, not even the results were published – let alone that the process was public. At Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's direction, this time the process was conducted in a much more transparent and inclusive manner.

In a first *reflection phase* from September 2009 to March 2010, six conferences took place in different member states. A group of twelve experts, led by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, used these occasions to discuss the new strategic concept with a wide range of actors, such as officials, scholars and journalists. The group also conducted talks in Moscow. In the second phase, the *consultation phase*, the Albright group conferred with decision-makers in all NATO member states about their preliminary results. In May the expert group published its report and gave their advice to the NATO Secretary General. Together with his closest staff, Mr. Rasmussen developed the first draft of the strategic concept, which was forwarded to the member states' governments at the end of September (*drafting and final negotiation phase*). Only six weeks later, final negotiations based on the third draft began at the Summit meeting.

The whole process was accompanied by much scepticism. Most observers regarded the first two phases as time-consuming media spectacles and doubted that Mr. Rasmussen would be able to come up with a sound draft. Moreover, they feared that the member states would exert so much influence on the draft during the last negotiation phase that – given the short time – the result could only be a vague and uninspired text.

However, the former Prime Minister of Denmark proved that also as NATO Secretary General, he is more a general than a Secretary. He met all the goals he had set: The new strategic concept was finished in time; it is a relatively short paper of eleven pages; it is composed in an accessible, clear language; it is a political paper without military details or overblown special interests; and it has been developed through a broad, mostly public, debate.

The most important task for this paper was to repair the fragile political consensus within the Alliance. The transparent and inclusive process contributed to that. For instance, in the reflection phase most member states – and many NATO partner states – felt the need to publish so-called Non-Papers, which defined the national strategic priorities. These Non-Papers not only made it much easier to define the new Allied strategy but also forced the member states to

think about the future strategy of NATO at an early stage. It remains to be seen, however, whether such a complex and open process will always be advisable for NATO. Too much seems to depend on the Secretary General's personality and the member states' willingness to be included relatively late into the drafting.

II. KEY TOPICS

1. Threat Analysis

The Allies have differing perceptions of the manner and intensity in which their security is threatened. While for example Eastern European member states fear Russian revisionism in particular, states like Spain and Italy regard instability in the Mediterranean as an urgent threat to their security. The US and Great Britain on the other hand consider international terrorism – especially in connection with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – the most pressing threat to the West. The different perceptions are a natural part of an Alliance that nowadays consists of 28 members. And they are the inevitable expression of an era which is not shaped by the confrontation of military blocks but by a diffusion of threats.

The strategic concept manages to do justice to this reality and to prioritize threats at the same time. Thus, the concept underlines the unity of the transatlantic security area. Furthermore, the explicit link to Article IV strengthens the political character of the Alliance, which allows all members to discuss their security-political considerations and concerns within the Alliance and search for solutions together.

The section on the security landscape names nine key threats. It starts with the finding that the risk of a *conventional attack* against NATO's territory is relatively low. Nonetheless, this risk should not be ignored. After all, on a global level, we see more proliferation than disarmament, and the spread of *ballistic missiles* poses a "real and increasing" threat to NATO's members. In this context, the *spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction* gives particular reason for concern. This applies even more in relation to *international terrorism* and the instability that comes from *failing/failed states*. Moreover, *cyber attacks* and *disruptions of the energy supply* gain more and more importance, since they can affect the security, prosperity and the functionality of Western societies more than ever. Finally, the concept names new security threats, such as the development of laser weapons and other *incalculable technological trends*, as well as the consequences of *climate change*.



2. Article V

Given the difficult and long engagement of NATO in Afghanistan, the interpretation of the Washington Treaty's key article, stating that an armed attack against one or more NATO members shall be considered an attack against them all, became the core issue of the debate about the Alliance's future orientation. How can an "attack" be defined, especially if one thinks about new threats like cyber or energy security? Is "defence" always reactive or can some situations require preventive action? Will NATO limit itself to a narrow interpretation of its treaty, and regard the defence of Alliance territory against traditional state aggression as its core task? Or does a time of globalized threats require a broader interpretation of security with military interventions out of area as the norm rather than an exception?

The strategic concept avoids a clear juxtaposition of these alternatives and thus a definite answer. Implicitly however, the document reflects an "As-Well-As-NATO" that both accentuates its "core business" of territorial defence (especially in light of financial pressure) and a definition of modern defence stressing operability and deployability.

Those who advocated a limitation of NATO to core tasks of national defence can claim success: The fact that conventional military conflicts, especially by means of ballistic missiles, are named first, speaks for itself. Fighting international terrorism or stabilizing fragile states are secondary tasks. Afghanistan is mentioned only once throughout the whole concept, and only in the context of the Western Balkans and the lessons learned with regard to comprehensive security. ISAF is not described as a blueprint for the future. And while new challenges like cyber attacks and energy security gain more attention than they did in previous concepts, they are not directly linked to Article V as was suggested by many influential globalists such as Senator Richard Lugar in 2006.

On the other hand there is a separate chapter on crisis management which begins with two unambiguous sentences: "Crises and conflicts beyond NATO's borders can pose a direct threat to the security of Alliance territory and populations. NATO will therefore engage, where possible and when necessary, to prevent crises, manage crises, stabilize post-conflict situations and support reconstruction." If it serves the member states' security interests (like in Afghanistan), NATO remains willing and ready to engage in military interventions or state-building. Engagements of this kind are on equal footing with traditional national defence when it comes to military planning: "We will [...] develop and maintain robust, mobile and deployable conventional forces to carry out both our Article 5 responsibilities and the Alliance's expeditionary operations." The focus on an improvement of civil-military cooperation is an outgrowth of this policy. NATO will

even get the controversial unit for civil crisis management, albeit at first on a "modest" scale. This means: NATO remains a regional Alliance with a global horizon. The military as well as the political strategy of Allies and the Alliance as a whole must encompass both traditional defence as well as stabilization missions beyond the Alliance's borders.

3. Nuclear Strategy

In the face of new threats like terrorism and cyber attacks, the role of NATO's nuclear weapons has become increasingly unclear. The central questions of a nuclear strategy – who is deterred from what by which means? – are harder to answer today than they were twenty years ago. Since US President Barack Obama adopted the vision of a world free from nuclear weapons (Global Zero) in April 2009, NATO's nuclear strategy is under even more pressure. It is no longer sufficient to negotiate with Russia about significant cuts in arsenals – the aim instead is total disarmament. As a consequence, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement was put into question. The 2009 coalition treaty of the German government for instance professes the withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from German territory as desirable. Foreign minister Guido Westerwelle has been particularly vocal about this.

It is thus remarkable how explicitly the new strategic concept endorses the nuclear status quo. NATO declares its general support for the objective of a nuclear free world, but does not do so in reference to Global Zero but merely in reference to the 40-years-old Non-Proliferation Treaty. Moreover, NATO conditions further cuts on Russian steps towards greater transparency. Furthermore it remains a principle that there will be no unilateral disarmament of NATO: "[A]s long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance."

The strategic concept even strengthens nuclear sharing: "We will ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements." Accordingly, France prevailed on most contentious issues of nuclear strategy: The nuclear weapons of France (and Great Britain) are explicitly recognized as an independent deterrent within the Alliance. Nuclear deterrence and missile defence remain – as always declared by France – two separate tasks. A linkage of missile defence and nuclear disarmament, as demanded by the German foreign minister, is not in the document.

However, the strategic concept does not specify how an "appropriate combination" of conventional and nuclear forces is supposed to look like in the future. The general need for nuclear weapons is suggested rather than explained. At least, the concept missed the chance to outline a compre-



hensive and coherent nuclear strategy. Given the difficult political circumstances, the continuation of strategic ambiguity is nevertheless a laudable result. After all, the debate about Global Zero is a Western soliloquy – the worldwide development points in the opposite direction. Thus, NATO is well advised not to devalue its own capabilities too fast.

4. Missile Defence

The Alliance declared as early as in the strategic concept of 1991 that it might well need a system to defend against ballistic missiles – from the Middle East in particular. Now, this system is finally going to be realized: “We will develop the capability to defend our populations and territories against ballistic missile attack as a core element of our collective defence, which contributes to the indivisible security of the Alliance.” Consequently, there will be no further bilateral agreements, but a system in “active cooperation” with Russia, covering all Allied territory. The strategic and technical details of such a system remain unclear, but as several speeches of Mr. Rasmussen indicate, the initial step will be to link national missile defence systems originally designed to protect troops in the field. This explains Mr. Rasmussen’s surprisingly low cost estimate of 200 Million Euros over a period of ten years. Taking into account that many national capacities still have to be build or expanded and most established systems are far from offering the protection expected from a true missile defence shield, the overall costs will be much higher.

Moreover, the question of how the command over such a system will be structured remains open. Russia, for one, has a very different understanding of a close cooperation on missile defence than the US and most other Allies do. And Turkey pressed until the very last for the command over those parts of the system based on her territory. While this initiative failed, it was a clear success for Turkey that the strategic concept does not explicitly name Iran and its missile and nuclear programs as primary cause of the system’s necessity.

5. Russia

Russia is a difficult partner. Its instrumentalisation of energy policy instills fear in dependent states. Since the 2008 war in Georgia and the following occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, unease about Russia’s neighborhood policy is at a highpoint. And the domestic development of the country often does not live up to standards of democracy and the rule of law. At the same time however, only a Russia that is closely connected to the West can contribute to stability and progress in Europe – especially as Russia is an indispensable partner when it comes to the solution of various international problems.

The new strategic concept takes a clear stand in favor of a close cooperation with Russia: “NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance as it contributes to creating a common space of peace, stability and security. NATO poses no threat to Russia. On the contrary: we want to see a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia, and we will act accordingly, with the expectation of reciprocity from Russia.” The added expectation hardly diminishes the thrust of this section, especially since the paper keeps mum about the well-known conflicts between Russia and the Alliance. Instead, the document calls for a more intense use of the NATO-Russia council and suggests concrete fields of cooperation. Besides missile defence (which might not be the best example because of incongruent interests), these cover – among others – terrorism, drug trafficking and piracy.

In fact, NATO as well as Russia are well advised to seek close cooperation in fields of common interests. Positive experiences thus gained might help to create the level of mutual trust that is the prerequisite for the solution of crucial strategic questions in fields of conflicting short-term interests. It is important to note that in most cases, progress on these issues is dependent more on change in the attitudes of Russia than in those of NATO. Until then, President Medvedev’s welcome participation in the Lisbon summit, which has been praised as “historic”, remains merely symbolic.

6. Enlargement

The enlargement of NATO is no longer high on the agenda. At the 2009 summit meeting in Strasbourg and Kehl, Croatia and Albania became members of the Alliance. The 2008 summit of Bucharest declared that Ukraine and Georgia would become members (without specifying a concrete date). This enthusiasm is gone – understandably given the developments in Ukraine and Georgia. In the new strategic concept, both countries are only granted further cooperation within the bilateral NATO commissions. But other steps towards further enlargement, which have often been discussed in the past – such as in the Balkans or in Northern Europe – also do not play a role in the new document, even if it emphasizes the general openness of NATO to all European democracies.

7. Partnerships

The new strategic concept dedicates a long section to NATO’s partnerships. This is not a surprise, neither in form nor in content. In the age of globalization NATO needs partners – states as well as institutions – to efficiently provide for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. For this purpose, improved cooperation with the United Nations and the European Union is envisaged once more, and already established



partnership programs like the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative are all mentioned. NATO declares its willingness to cooperate with every state that aspires to peaceful international relations. It is striking that in this context democracy and common values do not play a more prominent role. Obviously, NATO signals its willingness to engage peacefully with China and other difficult partners in the Middle East and elsewhere.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The new strategic concept consolidates the consensus within the Alliance and provides orientation for the coming years. It demonstrates that NATO is more than the mission in Afghanistan, and correctly addresses various threats to the security, prosperity and lifestyle of the West. Notably, NATO presents itself more modest and with damped rhetoric. Not only is enlargement put aside but the idea of a global NATO, the alliance of democracies as guardian of liberalizing and prospering globalization, is also played down. Overall, the document eschews ideology – democratic partners outside the Atlantic area like Australia, Japan and South Korea are not mentioned, the threat of Islamic terrorism is not explicitly named.

Nonetheless, the basic consensus remains visible – with the strategic concept and the prior debates, NATO assures itself. NATO is defined as a political, military and value-based Alliance. The variety of tasks for NATO is not reduced, military planning focuses mainly on operability and deployability. New threats like cyber attacks and energy security are considered, but not raised to a new *raison d'être*.

In many parts, the concept is sketchy and unspecific, but this is the nature of such a basic document and owed to the difficulty of uniting 28 states on one formulation. Nobody could really expect this paper to solve all strategic questions and political conflicts inside NATO. But it provides orientation and direction for future work within the member states and within the Alliance. The questions are clearer than ever before: How shall the relationship with Russia be shaped exactly? How can a new efficient and affordable missile defence system be created? How can cyber security be provided for the entire Alliance? Which crises and developments outside the Alliance's area pose threats to the West – and how can NATO react to them?

These are the immediate questions of the 21st century. With its new strategic concept, NATO proves to be up-to-date and shows once more that it remains a vivid Alliance, indispensable for Europe's security.