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After the Operations: Outlook for the NATO Summit in Chicago

Patrick Keller

The Heads of State and Government of the 28 NATO member countries will meet in Chicago on 20 and 21 May 2012. This will be the first NATO summit since November 2010 in Lisbon and the first on American soil since 1999 in Washington. In contrast to those conferences, this time no new strategic concept or similar path-finding decisions are expected. Instead, the interim status of the present course is to be examined and announced at this *implementation summit* – for example, with a view toward the withdrawal from Afghanistan or setting up a missile defense shield. But these individual questions will be overshadowed by the problem of how NATO can guarantee the security of member states in times of stringent budgets and diminishing willingness to intervene in the future. This paper provides an overview of the topics to be discussed in Chicago and outlines the status of the strategic debate.

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*I'm coming home
Via Chicago
Searching for a home
Via Chicago
– Wilco*

I. SMART DEFENSE

The guiding topic of the summit will be “Smart Defense.” This is the concept used by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to respond to the difficult budgetary situation in nearly all member countries of the alliance. He is thus attempting to consolidate the military capability of NATO in periods of stringent budgets: “I know that in an age of austerity, we cannot spend more. But neither should we spend less. So the answer is to spend better. And to get better value for money. To help nations to preserve capabilities and to deliver new ones. This means we must prioritize, we must specialize, and we must seek multinational solutions. Taken together, this is what I call Smart Defense.” (September 30, 2011) This definition itself shows the difficulties being faced by NATO – and that “Smart Defense” will not go far as a conceptual solution and as a central topic at the summit. Six aspects contribute to this assessment.

First, “Smart Defense” is evidently the NATO response to the significant reductions in defense budgets which were implemented and are still expected in nearly all member countries in the course of the financial and economic crisis. The cuts are of a fundamental nature and will permanently change the West’s defense capabilities. For example, Germany is planning to cut about one-third of the annual defense budget in the next three years; in the US savings in the amount of one trillion dollars are pending over the next decade (14% less than previously planned); and Great Britain with its cuts amounting to nearly eight billion dollars by 2014 (reduction of 8%) is saying good-bye to its role as a global military power. The traditional agreement to spend at least two percent of gross domestic product on defense is hardly mentioned anymore – it was never comprehensively implemented anyway.

It is the NATO Secretary General’s task to struggle against this trend and to point out its dangerous consequences. But his insistence on expenditure-stagnation (“neither should we spend less”) appears unrealistic and by no means as impressive as his former reference to the cuts in defense budgets: “There’s a point where you no longer cut fat; you’re cutting into muscle, and then into bone.” (October 8, 2010). To date, he and the leading defense policy-makers of the alli-

ance have not succeeded in communicating the urgency of the situation convincingly enough that the trend toward creeping disarmament has lost its force.

Second, this fits with the change in NATO parlance. The phrase “we need to do more with less,” has become “better with less.” It can be argued that in the case of security policy, “more” resources is a prerequisite for “better” capabilities. But even if you consider “better with less” to be possible and meaningful, you must find this formulation illusory when taking the force of the reductions into consideration. Thus, “Smart Defense” contains within itself the kernel of its own failure – or at least an inherent self-imposed limitation.

Third, “Smart Defense” indeed draws the correct conclusions – if we accept the inevitability of drastic savings: Defense planning and in particular armaments planning in the alliance must adhere to the requirements for specialization and multi-nationalization in order to preserve effectiveness. In this respect, “Smart Defense” is to NATO what “Pooling & Sharing” is to the common security and defense policy of the European Union. Both catch words, however, are standing on a conceptually weak foundation. This is because the difficult task of harmonization of the structures of planning, procurement, and provision across the alliance is by no means solved by the idea of pooling capabilities and using them on a shared basis. As recommendations, “Smart Defense” and “Pooling & Sharing” are similarly simplistic to Obelix’ plan for a bank robbery: “We’ll go in, get the money, and we’ll leave again.”

Fourth, it is inherent in the “prioritizing” promoted by Rasmussen that this strategy cannot succeed by itself. This is because the harmonizing of alliance defense requires a harmonizing of alliance policy as well. But NATO member states are as far away from a mutual and prioritized threat analysis as they are from a common attitude towards the use of military force. Consequently, many alliance partners harbor doubt about the dependable use of potential joint capabilities, at the latest since the German attitude toward the Libya mission. Therefore the desired coordination of



force structures has also been out of reach – to say nothing about national reservations of an (industrial-)political nature.

Fifth, the term “Smart Defense” moves an old transatlantic split into the center of the debate: the dispute about burden-sharing. Because if the Secretary General makes the prudent allocation of resources the main subject of the summit, then mutual frustration is a foregone conclusion. For the future, the US expects the Europeans to assume greater financial and military responsibility for the security of their continent. The departing US defense minister, Robert Gates, explains this with diminishing resources of the Pentagon; President Barack Obama with the strategic shift towards the Pacific. But from the viewpoint of leading European politicians – who will probably find Chicago a welcome diversion from the usual EU crisis summits – the timing for a scolding lecture about their defense budgets could hardly be worse. In any case, initially no constructive results are to be expected from this dispute.

Sixth and finally, “Smart Defense” is unsuitable as a label for the NATO summit because it is without any media or policy attraction. By its focus on diminishing resources, it reinforces the chorus of voices spouting the supposed decline of the West and of the USA. This effect cannot be desirable – especially for the host and its re-election campaign. Even if one were to succeed in making the term conceptually fruitful, it would still be unattractive for policy communications by NATO. Because in this case, conceptual subdivision of responsibilities means to achieve concrete and highly technical agreements about which country is to provide which military assets for which purpose within the alliance – and which partners are to be thereby unburdened. It would indeed be a sensation if NATO countries could agree before the summit on a mechanism for how such an agreement could be worked out. And even this sensation – as urgently as it is in fact needed – would not even result in a shrug of the shoulders beyond the circle of security policy experts.

“Smart Defense” is an important project for maintaining NATO’s capacity to act in an age of diminishing resources. However, it would have to be structured by a complex political and bureaucratic process which will tangibly impact the self-delusions of the alliance – for example, the belief that one can obtain the same level of security with diminishing outlays. Thus “Smart Defense” is not a useful motif for the summit in Chicago, where this process can at most be touched upon. The objective must at the least be to cap budget cuts and at the same time to produce a supportable concept for greater military synergy within the alliance.

II. AFGHANISTAN

The fundamentals of NATO’s Afghanistan policy are clear, especially since they also are affected by the election calculations of the American president. NATO will cease its combat mission by the end of 2014. At the same time, the West has committed itself beyond this time frame to supporting the Afghan government in stabilizing the country – NATO soldiers will remain in the country for at least the training of Afghan security forces. The goal of the summit will thus be, firstly, to announce progress in handing over Afghan territory to Afghan responsibility, and secondly to avoid giving the impression that NATO is withdrawing too quickly – or even as a defeated force.

In order to present this balancing act as a clever and successful strategy, over the past few weeks there have been a number of international Afghanistan conferences which produced hardly any concrete results. Instead, they took on more the nature of departure celebrations. The mission in Afghanistan has characterized the alliance over the past decade; that it is now coming to an end is to be mediated of Chicago with resolute relief. However, no solution is to be expected for the three fundamental problems in the situation in Afghanistan. *Reconciliation* of the parties to the civil war is uncertain; the *transfer* of responsibility to the weak and questionable Karzai government is risky; and the economic *development* of the country is still at its beginning.

The summit is probably the wrong place – and certainly the wrong time – for an honest assessment of the success or failure of the NATO mission. The assessment of this mission influences too many questions of the future – from our policy with respect to Pakistan to our basic willingness for *nation-building* – that are still being disputed within the alliance, as that they can be elevated to the high stage of summit diplomacy in May.

III. MISSILE DEFENSE

In addition to withdrawal from Afghanistan, the establishment of a missile defense shield in Europe was the second important decision of the NATO summit in Lisbon; an interim report on its implementation is expected in Chicago. The goal of Secretary General Rasmussen is to announce the *Interim Operational Capability* of the defense shield at the summit. This will probably succeed, thanks to the commitment of the Obama administration to missile defense.



Obama's *Phased Adaptive Approach* is intended to avoid the two essential political problems of missile defense. This approach is directed initially only against the threat to European NATO countries of medium-range missiles from the Middle East (think: Iran), not against intercontinental missiles which could hit the USA. Thus the interceptors need not be stationed in Poland or in the Czech Republic, as per the former plans of the Bush administration, but rather could be restricted to Aegis destroyers in the Mediterranean Sea. Thus the objections of Russia that missile defense will undermine their own deterrence can be invalidated. Also, the project will not fail prematurely due to a lack of financial support by the European NATO allies – missile defense will practically be a gift from the USA.

Both ideas work well enough to achieve the minimum goal of *Interim Operational Capability*; but not so well that the structural problems of missile defense would be surmounted. For example, Russia is still demanding guarantees that this system will not reduce Russian offensive potential – a technical and political impossibility from NATO's view. Even more difficult is that the European allies are committed merely to make rather symbolic and cost-neutral contributions to the missile shield. For example, Spain has agreed to station four of the Aegis destroyers at the Rota naval base, whereas Turkey has approved the construction of a US radar system. Irrespective of their minor support the European NATO allies expect an equal-authority involvement in the command structures of missile defense. From this, further typical disputes may be incurred within the alliance. This will apply in particular when the system is to be expanded so as to defend American territory as well, or if the Americans relocate their mobile system elsewhere, for example, to the Pacific. Without a considerable change in the European position towards more earnest, active, and financial support for this system, there will not be reliable protection for Europe against enemy missiles in the foreseeable future.

This conclusion is sobering because NATO recognized the fundamental necessity for missile defense as long ago as the early 1990s. It is not a glorious chapter for the alliance that every form of progress in this direction has up to now remained a patchwork. In Chicago it will be clear that this is due solely to disunity within the alliance – and not, as is often asserted, to Russian resistance. Because it is undisputed that at least the *Interim Operational Capability* will proceed even without Russian consent. The Russian argumentation was too transparently focused on restricting Western capabilities, not towards constructive cooperation. Therefore it was inherently wrong to make missile defense,

of all things, a test case for improved NATO-Russia relations. In view of the latest developments in Russian domestic politics, in Illinois there will also not be a smooth summit with the Russian president à la Lisbon. This provides one more reason to speak openly on matters of missile defense at the NATO summit, and ultimately to commit to the required political and financial pledges – or to accept responsibility for an insufficient protective shield.

IV. NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

The third decision at Lisbon, which will be reviewed in Chicago, is the formulation of a *Deterrence and Defense Posture Review*. It deals with the adequate military structure of the alliance, including conventional capabilities and developments in cyberspace. But at its core it is about the role of nuclear weapons, which are of particular importance not only for NATO's defense doctrine, but also for the identity of the alliance. After all, in the Strategic Concept 2010 NATO declared itself a "nuclear alliance."

After months of consultation there is still disagreement among specialists and politicians about how exactly this nuclear alliance is to be structured. How many nuclear weapons does NATO need? Where and how should they be stationed? What is their purpose, and under what conditions should they be used? And finally: Does not the planned missile shield (*deterrence by denial*) reduce the need for nuclear deterrence (*deterrence by punishment*)?

It is laudable that this exceptionally complex and multifaceted subject is being discussed by NATO at all – the first time since the end of the Cold War. However, until Chicago no concrete results are expected, because the positions are gridlocked: Whereas the nuclear countries and most members from Central and East Europe are stressing the fundamental relevance of nuclear weapons, countries like Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, and Norway are striving for disarmament, emphasizing the reduced salience of nuclear weapons. In addition there is the determined persistence of France for its independent deterrence capability, which also includes the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear aggressors, if needed. It is also noteworthy how little of Obama's *Global Zero* initiative of 2009 is still to be felt in the NATO debate, even on the American side; the role of the US as nuclear security guarantor for the alliance partners is clearly in the foreground.

Therefore it cannot be assumed that the status quo will change with Chicago – even with respect to seemingly *low-hanging fruit* such as ending nuclear sharing. Instead,



probably an interim report will be prepared which conceals the differences of opinion. The fundamental question of how deterrence is to be organized in the 21st century will, however, continue to be discussed within the alliance.

V. PARTNERSHIPS

In his "Smart Defense" speech, General Secretary Rasmussen stated that he wants "an Alliance that is committed – capable – and connected." The first two adjectives describe the typical circles of debate within NATO: Cohesion and determination – military and political capability. The connectivity of NATO has gained prominence: its ability to cooperate with others.

The increasing relevance of partnerships is a direct outcome of the diminishing resources and of practical mission experience in recent years, especially in Afghanistan. If you seek to undertake formidable tasks but can afford to do less and less on your own, you need the support of others. For example, the ISAF-mission was and is significantly supported by the military and financial contribution of partners such as Australia, South Korea, and Japan. Ideally, both sides will benefit from the arrangement – NATO gains legitimacy and effectiveness, the partners gain regional stability, political advantages, and closer ties to the decision-making processes of the alliance (without the requirements of membership). The dynamics for enhanced usage and institutionalization of partnership thus come from different directions; this will be one of the key themes of international security policy during the coming months and years.

Conceptions of the alliance as a hub, as the center of international security policy, are still prominent within NATO. After all, NATO already has institutionalized partnership programs such as the *Partnership for Peace*, the *Mediterranean Dialogue* and the *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*. These initiatives have achieved varying degrees of success, for different reasons, and at this time a comprehensive evaluation is still pending. Evidently the developments in North Africa and the Middle East necessitate an urgent adaptation and enhancement of regional partnerships. In addition, NATO must also enhance partnerships not only with individual countries, but also with different international organizations and institutions, such as the UN, the AU, and the EU. In everyday affairs this is often cumbersome, as the contentious barrage in NATO-EU relations illustrates. But it is an indispensable endeavor towards the goal of greater efficiency and a really "smart" security policy.

Against this background, in April 2011 NATO concluded the "Berlin Package", which outlines the basis for a reform of its partnership policy. It deals primarily with improved

efficiency for the partnerships through harmonization of the instruments used and a specification of the military contributions by the partners to NATO missions. The framework agreement has in the meantime been charged with some details – for example, all partnerships in the future will be concluded via a standardized procedure (*Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program*) and then managed by NATO through a *Political and Partnerships Committee*.

Within NATO bureaucracy, many feel that these reforms have been sufficient. Still, one should hope for further such initiatives in Chicago, because the concrete embodiment of existing and future partnerships is still unclear. It needs to be considered, for example, how partner countries can be incorporated into the "Smart Defense" efforts for more efficient defense planning. Subsequently, discussions could be held on how such partners who are particularly close to NATO, not only geographically, but also with regard to their political culture and values – one could think of Sweden, for instance – can be included more closely in scenarios of common defense as per Article V. Thus a factually new quality of partnership could be created to the benefit of all involved. These examples show: This topic has more room for fresh ideas than the other typical NATO debates.

VI. PHASE FOUR

The summit agenda is determined by the daily business, but meetings like in Chicago always offer the opportunity to look into the future. It is to be assumed that for NATO the coming decade will differ significantly from the past one, which was often described as the "third phase" of NATO. In this view, the first phase was the Cold War, when NATO armed up primarily against Soviet Communism. The second phase was the 1990s, when NATO – not least through its enlargement policy – helped the emerging, liberal democracies in Europe to stabilize and the continent to achieve unity. The third phase began with the Kosovo war or, at the latest, on 11 September 2001, and was defined chiefly by NATO missions: military operations outside the alliance territory to ensure the security of member countries.

This phase is now coming to an end, most visibly through the pending withdrawal from Afghanistan and the completed withdrawal from Iraq (which has since led to the end of the NATO-directed training mission there). The stabilization mission in the Balkans is only very small; in Libya NATO avoided the use of boots on the ground from the very beginning. This is the consequence of political and financial constraints, of a war fatigue which is evident in all alliance countries. In addition, the trend that inter-state wars are becoming more rare is solidifying.



Against this background it is worth a thought that, over the past years, NATO has been defined by its missions. Central innovations and topics in NATO such as the *comprehensive approach* or the partnership programs were tailored to the missions or at least are understood under this aspect. With current operations coming to a close, this model of NATO expires. Then the fundamental strategic question of how NATO should and can guarantee the security of its members arises anew. Or more pointedly: Is NATO about to become a solution in search of a problem? How will phase four look like?

One frequent answer is that in the future NATO will focus on the so-called new threats: Terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy and cyber security and other "Emerging Security Challenges", such as they are being handled since 2010 in a new NATO division. This fits with Obama's announcement in his January 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* to provide – against the trend – greater funding for cyber security and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance).

From NATO's point of view the problem is that these new tasks, for example cyber security, require cooperation with various domestic and non-state actors, a role with which NATO is not familiar. Heretofore it has always had a sole responsible role, or at least had a leading-coordinating function. In addition, these new tasks are not purely of a military nature but rather require civilian resources. Thus, the core capabilities of the alliance first come into play when the new challenges have turned relatively classical. Until then, the emerging security challenges do not fit with

the traditional Article V scenario – which is why they were combined in this new department to begin with. This means that NATO is likely to have a credibility problem if it should declare these topics to be its new core business in phase four.

In addition, NATO has to struggle with a diffuse and irregular threat situation to which it must adapt. Since no one can predict in what form the next substantial attack on the security of the West will emerge, the alliance must remain flexible. Thus it is probable that the phase of operations is not entirely over, but rather is experiencing merely a breathing space. After all, in spite of NATO successes, the overall global security situation since 2001 has not become more stable. The situation in Pakistan, the Iranian nuclear program, or the tensions in the Pacific area provide cause for concern. The large operations of the past – Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya – more or less happened to NATO, rather than that they had been predicted and planned. Thus the future might feature more similarities with the history of Western stability projection than is commonly assumed today. This is why it is the primary task of responsible security policy to defend the needed flexibility vis-à-vis budgetists, spin-meisters, and lobbyists. This demands at the least a strategy for how the alliance can survive politically, militarily, and financially until the next catastrophe requires everything that NATO already knows how to provide.

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