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The Alliance in Search of Topics

Sankt Augustin/Berlin, February 2006

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NATO Before the Summit

At the end of November 2006, a NATO summit meeting will take place in Riga, Latvia. Another summit is planned for 2008. As a general rule, such meetings of the heads of state and government serve to recognize a particular occasion or to confirm NATO decisions of great political import. Therefore, they take place far less frequently than European Union summits. The NATO summit in Rome in 1991, at which the Alliance celebrated the end of the Cold War and agreed upon a new strategic concept, or the summit in 1999 in Washington D. C. commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the Alliance are prime examples. Furthermore, the approach of politically significant summits have frequently provided a defined time limit for the decision-making process in the Alliance, pushing conciliation and agreement on controversial questions the closer the deadline drew nigh. Thus, NATO summits have also come to symbolize changes and further development in the Alliance. It is therefore not surprising that since the fall of the Berlin Wall more summit meetings have been deferred than in the entire 40-year history of the Alliance previously.

However, there are also summits, at which neither a particular occasion is recognized, nor decisions of particular relevance must be made. Rather, such meetings are staged with great media effect, but lack a corresponding proportion of agreed upon resolutions. As the decided measures at 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul show, a gathering of the heads of state and government was hardly required.

A similar fate threatens the Riga Summit. While the 2008 planned meeting of the leaders of the various NATO member states is to be a farewell event for the outgoing President George W. Bush, at this point, there is still no real important occasion for a summit conference in fall 2006. Consequently, the atmosphere in the NATO General Secretary's office is frenzied, as they consider which themes and resolutions should constitute the summit. Initially, the summit was declared the "Transformation Summit" at which the conversion of the Alliance into a worldwide-operating and militarily efficient organization was to be highlighted; however, this title has become rather contentious. For one, the word "transformation" has degenerated for many, even within NATO, into an all-encompassing term, being over-used and having only limited meaning. It signifies particular conceptual changes in the area of armed forces (taken from the "Allied Command Transformation" in Norfolk, Virginia) as well as NATO's general political adjustment to the new security policy challenges after the end of the Cold War and the catastrophe of September 11. In addition, "transformation" denotes the development of East European states into stabile democracies – a process very

significantly supported by NATO. Making “transformation” the core of the meeting in Riga, means, declaring NATO’s general evolution as the summit theme.

Moreover, the term transformation presently has a negative overtone outside the Alliance, where a global and deployable NATO is frequently regarded as potentially aggressive.

In view of the apparent problem of a “meeting in search for an occasion” two dangers are looming. On the one hand, the resolutions from Riga could fall short of the expectations to a meeting of the heads of state and government. The result would be another media event, which serves the further development of the Alliance little and dilutes the meaning of the summits even more. On the other hand, because summit themes are set on the agenda and are discussed until November, certain topics could gain an inflated dynamic and consequently develop counterproductively.

At the February 2006 Munich Security Conference, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer vaguely outlined some themes which could define the summit. Mentioned were the political dialogue in NATO as well as the “NATO Response Force” (NRF). Still needing clarification, however, is the issue of a new financing system for common operations (Common Funding). On this point, Germany, for instance, opposes the Secretary General’s wish to divide the cost for military operations among all members (instead of only among those states taking part).

In addition, there are several internal developments, which had been raised initially as potential summit topics, and, at least in part, still are. They include: reform of the internal structure of NATO; “Comprehensive Political Guidance”; the concept of “global partnership”; and NATO enlargement. What is the relevance of these issues and how will they be further developed in the months leading up to the summit?

Reform of NATO’s Internal Structures

A fundamental reform of the Alliance’s political and military structures is long overdue. Originally developed for 12 member states, the organization of the Alliance has failed over the past few years to adjust to the requirements of an increased number of members and to the fundamentally changed security policy conditions. Instead, uncontrolled organizational growth, inefficient decision-making processes and an overflowing number of “committees” characterize NATO’s management structures. The number of committees alone had grown to over 460 in the last few years – in-

cluding the exotic “Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society” and the “Shallow Water Committee”. Frequently, their only purpose was satisfying the particular interests of a single member state or creating positions for presumed leadership functions. Although under NATO General Secretary Robertson the number of committees was reduced by approximately 30 percent, fundamental organizational deficiencies still exist. They transcend purely organizational questions and touch on other problem areas such as political consensus building, the inclusion of a steadily growing number of members in the decision-making process and the political coordination of increasingly complex procedures.

For a while now the main question in discussions on consensus finding was whether NATO should continue to make resolutions through unanimous vote (Consensus Rule) or whether majority decisions are also worth considering. Already during the Kosovo war criticism could be heard of the slow voting process in the NATO council; sceptics spoke of “war by committee”. The transatlantic disagreement on Iraq accorded a new dynamic to the problem. Disappointed by the anti-Iraq position of several European allies, influential American senators called for the end of the Consensus Rule, maintaining that countries that rejected alleged essential NATO-decisions should be able to be overruled. In a Senate amendment, the United States President in May 2003 was asked to place the Consensus Rule on the agenda of the NATO council by the end of 2004. The administration in Washington, however, did not wish to let this discussion escalate further. Apparently the insight prevailed that with majority decisions a situation could also arise in which the USA must yield to other NATO partners. Moreover, it also became evident that lacking consensus is an expression of political differences which cannot be dispelled merely by altering the decision-making process.

The currently debated reform concerning the functioning within the Alliance is of a far less fundamental nature. Indeed, it deals similarly with consensus finding and the ability to act, but more so on the operational, internal levels of NATO. In April 2005, NATO Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer authorized the Danish diplomat, Jasper Vahr, along with a working group to prepare a report on the basic internal reform of the Alliance. It was to focus on three essential aspects:

- Generally simplifying the operational procedures in NATO,
- Assuring the Alliance’s political leadership control over all important procedures at all times,
- And reforming the structures in the NATO headquarters.

In autumn 2005 Ambassador Vahr presented a first draft of possible reforms and with it sparked a fierce internal debate. The main problem was that the NATO member countries argued, at least in part, for entirely opposing positions. Although many points were criticized, the suggestion that met the greatest degree of resistance was the merging of NATO's political and military staffs – the International Staff (IS) and the International Military Staff (IMS). While this suggestion was greeted by the majority of the NATO ambassadors as a step towards the trimming down of double structures, NATO's military authorities vehemently rejected it. Their argument went that an International Military Staff is required in order to be able to give the political levels independent and objective military suggestions and advice. Proponents of the measure countered that "objective" military advice does not exist at present anyway – the stance of the military is always determined by the political views of its own respective nations. Last but not least behind the very intense argument was the competition for influence in the Alliance as well as the question to what extent NATO members are actually prepared to give up positions in NATO's hierarchy (including those occupied by their own countries) in order to streamline the structures.

In December 2005, NATO generals rejected the proposed reforms in the form of a common letter, signed by the chiefs of defense staffs (CHODs) to the NATO Secretary General. With it, the entire Vahr-Report was put into question. The expressed criticism was unexpectedly harsh, and although not becoming public, it did place General Secretary de Hoop Scheffer in a corner. For one, the reform scheme in its existing state would not draw a consensus in the Alliance. For another, de Hoop Scheffer did not want to water down the reform project too greatly just to quell all qualms and to make it acceptable to all. In the end, the time plan of this very ambitious internal project completely fell apart. Originally a final report should have been presented at the December 2005 conference of NATO foreign ministers. After this deadline had passed, it was hoped that agreement on a document would be reached by spring 2006.

At this point, however, it seems there will be no comprehensive reform report at all. Instead, the reform group under Ambassador Vahr is concentrating on individual reform projects on which consensus is possible. Thus, the large internal NATO reform may not only be filed and forgotten, but could also complicate, rather than simplify, procedures in various sub-areas of the organizational structure (as for instance with regard to the debate concerning the combining of the IS and IMS, where a civil military "integrated project team" had been considered).

The “Comprehensive Political Guidance”

For a while now on the political level complaints that NATO had widely lost its main function as a forum for political consensus finding on important security questions could be heard. According to critics, NATO suffers from a strange contradiction. On the one hand, NATO strove towards an improvement of its military capabilities and was slowly but steadily developing flexible and deployable armed forces. On the other hand though, ever fewer agreements could be reached in the Alliance, *for what* or *against whom* these forces should be used. The reasons for this impasse are manifold. Countries like France regularly block debates on fundamental political issues (like the presently pressing problem of energy security), because the French ultimately want to prevent NATO from gaining political status and thus adding to the Alliance’s weight in Euro-Atlantic relations. Others worry that extensive discussions on strategy make the differences of opinion within the Alliance visible and could abet the image of a divided NATO.

Ideas for overcoming the problem are not lacking. The creation of a group of external experts (a “wise men group”), which is to develop methods of resolution, has been suggested as well as the creation of a committee inside NATO – similar to the “Harmel Group” in the 1960s. Others view a revision of the 1999 Strategic Concept of NATO as a way of “repoliticizing” the Alliance. This fundamental strategic document is out-dated and urgently needs to be amended. If this were tackled, the argument goes, political debates would be the logical consequence and the Alliance partners would be forced to address the question of NATO’s political aims. Critics, however, point to the fact that this entails a very explosive debate through which the fundamental differences and disagreements in the Alliance would be exposed.

Although this discussion first reached the wider public through Chancellor Schroeder’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2005, the problems of unclear political guidelines have long dogged NATO. Particularly the military leadership of the Alliance complained that it was lacking binding political instructions for armed forces planning or conducting military operations. Thus, at the June 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul, the project of “Comprehensive Political Guidance” (CPG) was commissioned. The NATO council was to develop a document (politically ranging below the Strategic Concept) which would be decided upon by the foreign ministers. Intended was a short paper with a concise political wording. With it, the course for future armed forces planning and development was to be set, as well as the execution of military operations. Moreover, it was to subordinate the multitude of NATO

military missions under a coherent political rationale. This document was supposed to have been presented and decided upon at the end of 2005.

Little, however, from this original plan remains. For one, it was foreseeable that the area of armed forces planning was a very complex subject, including questions of armament, finance planning, logistics, C3 (command, control, communication), standardization, etc. , A curt political directive could hardly give these topics their respective due. The same holds true for the wide field of operations planning. For another, throughout its development, the document attained a disproportionately high political significance – last but not least as a result of the public discussion concerning the political role of NATO as a central forum for the transatlantic security dialogue. The consequence (which actually should have been avoided through the assumed humble status of the document) was that every formulation was heavily debated and frequently only a formal, general compromise was found. Thus, its completion was seriously prolonged, missing the planned December 2005 deadline. Above all, the substance of the politically directive document fell victim to the need to reach consensus in the Alliance.

The “Guidance” now available was decided upon in December 2005 by the NATO ambassadors and is to be approved by the ministers of defense in June 2006. In November in Riga, the heads of state and government are to agree on it. Inside NATO, the document is characterized as “motherhood and apple pie” and is seen as being of very limited value. Only five pages in length, it is indeed tersely constructed, but nonetheless focuses too much on purely military or even technical issues to be of significance as political guidelines for the operational planning of NATO. Moreover, the report also rejects the necessity of reformulating the 1999 Strategic Concept. It thereby neglects a political strategic imperative, as NATO can hardly operate in the long run with an out-dated strategy. Furthermore, the statements of the CPG backslide into the status quo of discussions within the Alliance, as in the meantime, support for a new strategic concept has emerged not only from the American side. German Chancellor Merkel explicitly called for such a concept, suggesting that the heads of state and government adopt it on the occasion of the 60-year anniversary of NATO in 2009. Even if the NATO Council will officially be commissioned to develop such a concept (the so-called “tasking”) not before 2008, preliminary discussion should begin significantly earlier in the capitals of the member states.

Global Partnership

At the end of the Cold War, NATO responded by offering close partnership to its one-time adversaries. The goal of this partnership concept was to stabilize the former Warsaw Pact region, granting individual countries concrete help on the path to democracy. At its core, the partnership concept consisted of a mix of three elements:

- *Cooperation* – above all among the partner states in an effort to reduce the possibility of conflict;
- *Reform* – not just the military but also the political structures of the partner countries;
- *Education* – including concrete support, training and education in the partner countries.

In this vein, a fourth element could also be added to this triad, namely that of *Membership* – inasmuch as the applicant state meets the requirements through cooperation, reform and education for entry into the Alliance (and provided that its admission finds unanimous support of all NATO members).

The character of the original partnership concept has changed in two respects. First, a large number of former partner countries have meanwhile become members of NATO. With a few exceptions, the remaining partners will hardly qualify for entry into NATO in the foreseeable future and still others have no interest in membership at all. Thus a significant element of the partnership idea – namely the preparation for NATO membership – has been pushed to the background, thereby removing an incentive (or pressure) for the introduction of democratic structures.

Second, over the past few years, the expansion of NATO activities in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Far East and into Central Asia, have resulted in the establishment of an entire “partnership industry”. This has led to an endless number of forums, groups and committees, in which the different partner countries are pooled (the amount of acronyms of the respective groupings speaks volumes: PfP, EAPC, PAP, IPP, PARP, PMF, OCC, IPAP, PAP-T, MD, ICI...).

Both changes highlight the substantial necessity for reform of the NATO partnership concept. To be considered are the following questions:

- Are so many different groups of partner countries sensible, and, above all, can they be coordinated in a politically coherent fashion? How can this complexity

be overcome when Alliance structures are still oriented — at least in part — towards a smaller alliance still operating in the fixed parameters of the East-West conflict?

- How can contradictory effects vis-à-vis the various partner groups be prevented? For instance, the firm engagement of the USA in the Alliance serves to strengthen NATO in Eastern Europe, while at the same time it is weakening NATO's influence in the Middle East. Furthermore, NATO's activities in Iraq tend to corrupt the image of the Alliance in other Islamic partner countries.
- How does NATO deal with states which belong to the circle of democratic Alliance partners, but are discredited through gross human rights abuses? Could, for instance, states like Uzbekistan again be excluded from the partner program?

In light of the problems outlined above, it seems essential that the “partnership industry” be both re-structured and downsized. Not every partnership forum is worth keeping. The partnerships seen as necessary though must be furnished with sufficient means in order to achieve their objectives.

The USA in principle accepts that the existing bodies need slimming-down, yet they nonetheless pressure other member states for a substantial geographical expansion of partnerships. Under the catch phrase “global partnership”, Washington pushes for the creation of *worldwide* partnerships. There have of course always been loose contacts between NATO and countries far outside the periphery of Europe — consultations have been conducted for instance with Japan, Argentina or China. According to the American agenda, however, tight partnerships with countries like New Zealand, Australia, South Korea or Singapore should also now be established. United States government officials have even named Pakistan as a possible partner for closer cooperation with NATO. Behind these plans lies a double purpose: first, America hopes to use NATO's international partnerships as an element in its global strategy of fighting worldwide terrorism; and second, Washington wants to create regional and supra-regional networks to support the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

From the American perspective, both goals are reasonable and justifiable. It remains doubtful, however, whether a consensus can be found in the Alliance for such an ambitious project, and whether the required resources can be supplied. If it comes to a shift of necessary means away from the existing cooperative projects, the entire NATO partnership concept would get into trouble. Traditional partners would feel

neglected and could reduce or terminate their collaboration in common projects. Furthermore, a partnership with Pakistan would counter NATO's principles as a democratic Alliance.

Finally, "global partnership" would increase the political relevance of NATO as an international security policy actor – a point against which the French have already expressed their objections.

NATO Enlargement

On March 29, 2004, seven Eastern European countries joined NATO. Together with the enlargement of April 1999 which included Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, ten of 26 NATO members are descended from the former power sphere of the Soviet Union.

In both rounds of enlargement a fierce debate erupted between advocates and opponents, and in both instances the USA performed an about face in its position. During the first expansion round after the end of the Cold War, the Clinton administration was initially resistant to the idea of new NATO members, as they did not wish to endanger America's relations with Russia. Triggered by the mid-term elections in November, however, in fall 1994, the U.S. government changed sides and, together with Germany, commenced pushing wholeheartedly for enlargement.

At the second round of enlargement, the impulse for the American reversal came from an external event – the catastrophe of September 11. Until this point, nine (later ten) states had applied for NATO membership, pleading for the option of the "big bang" (the simultaneous entry of all or almost all candidates). Washington though initially shared the fear of the majority of its Alliance partners: worrying that the capacity of NATO to digest the "big bang" would be exceeded. In consequence, America sought the admission of only a few candidates. Even more credence was given to this view by the fact that the 1999 enlargement was still being completed. After the attacks in New York and Washington, the Bush administration's priorities fundamentally changed. In America's view, new NATO members promised wide international support for the "global war on terrorism" (G-WAT). Consequently, Washington lobbied for and finally achieved the highest possible number of new members: with the exceptions of Albania, Croatia and Macedonia, the other seven candidates were conferred membership status. The result was a strong support of the new members for the U.S. war in Iraq.

After the biggest enlargement step in the history of the Alliance, there is no overwhelming rush in the European NATO capitals to commence on a further round of admissions. Although Albania, Croatia and Macedonia remain official candidates, the date of a possible acceptance into the Alliance is no longer a topic. Solely Croatia has reasserted its claim as a serious contender for membership because of its significant advancements and, in particular, through the release of the former General Gotovina, who is accused of war crimes.

Currently, it is again the United States government actively pushing the enlargement discussion. Yet, it is less advocating for the three remaining candidates of the previous round; rather, America supports extending membership to Georgia and in particular the Ukraine. In turn, U.S. lobbyism for an enlargement of NATO by both countries causes significant skepticism within the Alliance.

From the American point of view, the support of Georgia and Ukraine is tenable, since it is based on hard geostrategical considerations as well as on “soft” political factors. Both countries are of particular strategic importance – the Ukraine because of its size and Georgia because of its geographic position in the Caucasus. Both have democratic movements – the “orange revolution” in Kiev and the “rose revolution” in Tiflis – something that corresponds to the freedom rhetoric of the American president. Moreover, both countries have pursued pro-American policies after the respective changes of government (during his visit in May 2005, Georgia prepared a triumphant reception for President Bush).

The majority of the remaining Alliance partners, however, are skeptical of a NATO enlargement particularly if Ukraine is concerned. First, such a step would evoke considerable protest in Russia. To that could be retorted that Moscow finally accepted the entry of the Baltic States into NATO. Yet, the Ukraine and its capital city of Kiev hold a special place in Russian thinking. Also the Ukraine is politically divided with a high percentage of the population being critical of the supposed Westernization of the country. Moreover, in the Ukraine, the state apparatus is now, as before, riddled with representatives of the old nomenclature; this hampers the transformation to democratic structures and would make cooperation within NATO difficult if the country were to be admitted as a member. Such is already a cause for worry with regard to several of the new members of NATO. The entry of the Ukraine would only exacerbate this problem. Furthermore, the military and political capabilities offered by Georgia or the Ukraine to joint NATO operations are at best limited. Besides all the other aforementioned problems, an Alliance, which must still adjust to the inclusion of

seven countries, would be overextended through another, even greater, step of enlargement (which above all serves American interests).

That being said, a future enlargement round is in no way excluded, especially since NATO has gone so far as to label the 2008 summit as a possible “enlargement summit”. At present the fears in the Alliance are growing that American pressure could initiate a dynamic on the enlargement question which pushes NATO into decisions which are actually contrary to those of the majority of the members. Thus, in the excitement of the summit, the issue could be determined already in 2006 without giving due course and consideration to the political and military merits of a further enlargement.

Conclusion

While a NATO summit is scheduled, no consensus has been reached on the occasion for it or the content to be discussed at it. Thus, without a doubt, an opportunity exists for placing relevant questions on the future of the Alliance on agenda. Taking advantage of this chance is all the more important considering that at the previous summit in Istanbul, the Alliance, under the weight of the Iraq crisis, was unable to reach any seminal resolutions.

At the same time the great danger exists – consciously or impelled through summit dynamics – of addressing the wrong priorities. Junior questions on the washed-up “Vahr process” or the politically backward guidelines, could be placed on the summit agenda, thereby rendering the event less productive. Decisive developments in the future of NATO like the partnership concept or the enlargement question could likewise cause harm, if they were made into subject matters of the summit. The consequences of an overhasty decision to enlarge or the rash “globalizing” of the partnership concept are incalculable.

NATO is still far away from being able to produce a cogent summit agenda. The discussion process thus far is not terribly optimistic. The Riga summit will no doubt be portrayed as an overwhelming success, with media staging having already begun. Whether it actually succeeds in producing long-term, practical results for the further development of NATO remains to be seen.