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What future for 'out-of-area' operations after Afghanistan?

The Lisbon Summit in November 2010, marked the beginning of the end of NATO's combat role in Afghanistan as part of the ISAF mission. The new Strategic Concept indicates that the Alliance will continue to undertake similar operations in the near future. However, a number of factors combine to suggest that this will not necessarily be the case. As a result, a new rationale for the Alliance is now needed. Indeed, there are signs that the Alliance has already reconciled itself with this fact, and begun to move towards a new basis for its continued existence.

NATO and 'out-of-area' operations

During the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization limited itself to the task of collective defence, and shunned operations beyond allied territory accordingly.[1] The end of the Cold War brought no immediate change to NATO policy. Yet by the time the Alliance had adopted a new Strategic Concept at the Washington Summit in April 1999, NATO policy on 'out-of-area' operations had been transformed.[2] The United States was instrumental in driving this process of change. US policy has itself undergone a transformation.[3] From being ardently opposed to the idea of a broad geographical scope for the Alliance, the US has become the main advocate of a 'global Alliance'. It was the US, which placed 'out-of-area' operations firmly on the NATO agenda after the end of the Cold War. It was the US, which eventually pushed for and consequently lead and dominated the allied air campaign against the Bosnian Serbs in the summer of 1995. The same is also true of the allied air campaign in Kosovo, launched in March 1999. Further, it was largely on the insistence of the US that the

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[1] See Frode Liland, *Keeping NATO Out of Trouble: NATO's Non-Policy on 'Out-of-Area' Issues during the Cold War*, Defense Studies No. 4/1999, The Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, Oslo, 1999.
[2] See Torunn Laugen, *Stumbling into a New Role: NATO's 'Out-of-Area' Policy After the Cold War*, Defense Studies No. 5/1999, The Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, Oslo, 1999.
[3] See Douglas T. Stuart, *Can NATO Transcend Its European Borders: NATO Out-of-Area Disputes*, Strategic Studies Institute—U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, 1991, www.dtic.mil.

Strategic Concept of 1999 impose no formal geographical limits on the activity of the Alliance as well as imbued it with a global flavour.

In relation to NATO's most significant 'out-of-area' operation to date, the US initially adopted a different position to that during the 1990s. In response to the terrorist attacks in the US on 9/11, NATO formally invoked Article 5 of the founding treaty, which regards an attack on one ally as an attack on all and obliges each ally to take action such as it deems necessary, including the use of force to defend those under attack. The US rebuffed the gesture however, and sidelined the Alliance during the subsequent operation in Afghanistan, named 'Enduring Freedom' and preceded to oust the Taliban regime from Kabul with the support of selected allies, most notably the United Kingdom. The shift in US policy can be attributed primarily to the lessons learnt from the experience in Kosovo and the ideological leanings of the George W. Bush administration. As the latter turned its attention to the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, intra-alliance divisions emerged over the legitimacy of military intervention. With NATO divided, discussions within the Alliance focused on whether Afghanistan could reconcile the differences.[4] NATO subsequently announced that it would assume command of the International Security Assistance Force, established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001) and tasked to assist the Afghans to maintain the security situation in the country, until they are able to do so independently. NATO formally assumed leadership of the ISAF mission in August 2003 and shortly after began to expand its reach, originally limited to Kabul, to cover the whole of Afghanistan.

At the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, the Alliance announced that it was entering a new phase in the ISAF mission. Starting in early 2011, NATO will progressively transfer the responsibility for maintaining security in the country to the Afghans. The aim is to complete the process of transition by the end of 2014. Transition will be 'conditions-based, not calendar-driven and will not equate to the withdrawal of ISAF-troops'. Not surprisingly, the Alliance has been keen to stress that 'transition does not mean exit'. Instead, 'it means moving into a supporting role'. To emphasize this point, the Alliance also concluded a long-term partnership with Afghanistan beyond 2014. The announcement was not driven by an objective assessment of the situation on the ground, but rather that millions of miles away.[5] Over the last few years, public support for the ISAF mission in the majority of NATO member states has plummeted, specifically in relation to the continuation of a combat role.[6] With this in mind, the announcement undoubtedly marks the beginning of the end of NATO's combat role in Afghanistan. Thus, there is no better time than the present to begin to assess the future of 'out-of-area' operations after Afghanistan, specifically those comparable in nature.

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[4] Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, New York: Penguin, 2009, pg. 349.

[5] Several credible reports maintain that the overall security situation in Afghanistan has not improved over the last year, but rather deteriorated. Also, despite meeting goals relating to the quantity of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police ahead of schedule, there are still some question marks concerning their actual quality.

[6] *Transatlantic Trends 2010: Key Findings*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington DC, 2010, pg. 15-16, www.transatlantictrends.org.

'Out-of-area' operations in the new Strategic Concept

The allies adopted a new Strategic Concept at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010. The Strategic Concept outlines their vision for the future of the Alliance over the next decade. Notably, it appears to envisage a bright future for 'out-of-area' operations. All of the three core tasks indentified therein necessitate a continued role for NATO beyond allied territory. First, the Strategic Concept implies that collective defence does not exclusively begin and end at the borders of the Alliance. Nor does it imply that collective defence pertains solely to allied territory, but allied populations as well, which it is pertinent to add, move around and so require protection on a global scale. Second, it reaffirms NATO's role in crisis management missions both at home and abroad and commits allies to further develop the necessary doctrine and military capabilities, including those of an expeditionary nature. Third, it obligates allies to advance international security through strengthening partnerships with relevant countries and international organizations as an instrument to boost the effectiveness of operations, including those overseas. In addition, the planned reform of allied command and control structures announced in Lisbon will reportedly place greater emphasis on operations beyond allied territory.

On the surface, it seems that the drafting of the new Strategic Concept was a consensual affair. However, this was not the case. Allies diverged and continue to differ over a wide range of issues relating to the future of the Alliance. Needless to say, this includes 'out-of-area' operations. Broadly speaking, the Alliance divides into three groups.[7] The first would prefer NATO to assume greater responsibility for maintaining international stability on a global scale. The 'globalists' do not question the original task of collective defence, but believe that due to the low probability of an armed attack against allied territory now and in the near future, NATO should consequently seek to shape the international order and to prevent the emergence of threats worldwide. Such thinking is broadly in line with that of the US, Canada, the UK, Denmark and arguably the Netherlands. The second group prioritizes the task of collective defence in the traditional sense. Still, the 'Article 5 coalition' do not oppose NATO taking on greater global responsibility so long as it does not undermine the task of collective defence. This view is largely in line, though to varying degrees with the newer members of the Alliance, especially Poland and the Baltic States, but also older ones such as Norway and Turkey. Finally, the third group includes allies, which for various reasons showed relatively little interest in the formulation of the new Strategic Concept and continue to exhibit indifference to the actions undertaken by the Alliance as well as the manner in which it evolves. This group generally comprises Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy. It also includes countries like Germany, which try to reconcile the visions of the first two groups, while at the same time oppose an excessive increase of expenditure resulting from allied activities.

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[7] Beata Górka-Winter, Marek Madej (eds.), *NATO Member States and the New Strategic Concept: An Overview*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 2010, www.pism.pl

A much gloomier picture

The new Strategic Concept appears to portray a bright future for 'out-of-area' operations after Afghanistan. Besides the fact that NATO is divided over the issue, a number of additional factors combine to depict a much gloomier picture. The first three factors are rather general, the fourth factor concerns the US, particularly the possible lessons learnt from the experience in Afghanistan and the final two relate to the ISAF mission more specifically. The first factor is war fatigue. For some allies, August 2010 marked the seventh year of their deployment in Afghanistan. For others, the duration of the deployment is fast approaching a decade. Several allies have also participated in multiple operations elsewhere during the same period. Due to this over activity and the cost it incurs in both blood and treasure, both the political elite and the general public in member states have grown progressively war weary. As a result, NATO governments will increasingly eschew involvement in combat operations overseas in the near future in favour of more publically palatable security instruments such as building local capacity as is already the case in Afghanistan or even place greater emphasis on conflict prevention. War fatigue not only extends to the political class and the general public, but also the armed forces. Reports have shown that the armed forces of several allies have been overstretched during the last decade and thus, require an extended period of consolidation.[8]

The second factor concerns the cost of conducting enduring operations at strategic distance, particularly those intensive in labour as well as combat. To use an example, the UK's involvement in Afghanistan has cost an estimated £13,400mln to date. From 2002 to 2005, the UK deployed an average of roughly 450 troops in the country in a stabilization role, costing an average of £150mln annually. In 2006, British troops deployed to Helmand province as part of stage three of ISAF's expansion and were subsequently forced to adopt a combat posture. Since then, the UK deployment has grown substantially in both personnel and cost. From 2006 to 2010, the UK has deployed an average of roughly 8,140 troops in the country, costing an average of £2,560mln per year. In 2010 alone, the cost was estimated at £4,463mln, which accounted for roughly 11.4% of the UK's annual defence budget.[9] Additional costs to be factored in include those incurred through injury to personnel and damage to costly equipment during operations as well as the negative impact enduring operations have on defence planning. Therefore, the sizable costs involved coupled with the current squeeze in public spending due to the global economic crisis suggests that NATO governments will again look to avoid involvement in comparable operations in the near future. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to convince an already skeptical political class and general public of the virtues of funding another foreign war, while public spending is being slashed across the board at home.

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[8] See *Recruiting and Retaining Armed Forces Personnel*, Report of the House of Commons Defence Committee, July 2008, www.publications.parliament.uk.

[9] See Gareth Chappell, *The British Strategic Defence and Security Review: Drivers, Issues and Possible Implications for NATO*, Strategic File 13, October 2010, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, www.pism.pl.

The final general factor relates to the current level of defence expenditure within the Alliance and the implications for military transformation. The Strategic Concept adopted in April 1999 committed member states to conduct operations beyond allied territory and outlined guidelines for the transformation of their military forces accordingly. Over the next decade, a number of initiatives and summit declarations followed. In this regard the Prague Capabilities Commitment and the Comprehensive Political Guidance adopted in May 2002 and November 2006 respectively are of particular significance. Thus far, the results of these initiatives and summit directives have been mixed.[10] One of the main obstacles to date has been insufficient defence spending and investment within the Alliance. In 2009, only 4 of 28 NATO member states (i.e. France, Greece, the UK and the US) spent the NATO goal of 2% or more of Gross Domestic Product on defence; only about a dozen have met goals for making 50% of their military forces deployable and 10% sustainable. The Alliance benchmark of 20% of military spending allocated to investment has been achieved by less than half of member states. The gap is especially large between the US and the rest of NATO. In 2009, US defence expenditure accounted for nearly 75% of that spent by the whole Alliance. Defence expenditure within the Alliance is likely to remain insufficient in the near future and continue to undermine the transformation of allied military forces accordingly. The global economic crisis has placed added pressure on the defence budgets of member states. In response, the majority of allies have either reduced defence spending and/or announced cuts and/or delays in equipment programmes.[11] In turn, this will only serve to widen the capabilities gap between the US and the rest of NATO and could serve to undermine Alliance interoperability in expeditionary operations accordingly.

The fourth factor concerns the likely lessons the US, as the strongest and most influential member of the Alliance will draw from the experience in Afghanistan. Since NATO assumed leadership of the ISAF mission, several factors have caused intra-allied divisions. By far the most divisive have been the restrictions imposed by several NATO governments on when, where and how their military forces may be used (also known as 'national caveats') along with the difficulty in raising troop contributions. Both have frustrated the US and prompted harsh criticism on their part of several allies. US frustration is grounded in the fact that both factors combine to undermine the overall command of the ISAF mission and its effectiveness accordingly. Allies innocent of the above, have not been immune to US criticism either. One of the possible lessons learnt therefore, could be that coalitions (though arguably tarnished by US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003), rather than Alliances are better suited for large-scale combat missions overseas. The US has indeed come to a similar conclusion in the past, most notably following intra-allied divisions during the campaign in Kosovo. This

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[10] *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement*, Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO, May 2010, pg. 37-38, www.nato.int.

[11] The impact of the global financial crisis has not all been negative as some countries, most notably the UK and France have concluded agreements on closer defence cooperation in an attempt to mitigate the impact on their respective militaries. Others, specifically Germany have linked reductions in defence expenditure to modernizing reforms and managed to augment their capabilities in the process.

factor is particularly important bearing in mind that the US has been instrumental in driving the 'out-of-area' agenda within the Alliance.

The two final factors relate to the future of the ISAF mission. The first concerns the manner in which allied combat forces are ultimately withdrawn from Afghanistan. If conditions on the ground facilitate a largely successful transition to Afghan security lead over the next four years, then this would not be the case. On the other hand, if current conditions remain or even worse, deteriorate then this could prove to be extremely divisive within NATO. In Lisbon, the Alliance agreed that transition would be 'conditions-based, not calendar-driven'. Yet at the same time, several allies have publically committed to a timetable to withdraw their combat forces and so to backtrack, bearing in mind the current lack of public support in member states, would be politically costly (as the Dutch coalition government found out in February 2010). Therefore, a scenario can quite easily be imagined whereby, some allies withdraw regardless, while others fight on, which could weigh heavy on alliance solidarity. The second factor relates to how individual allies will assess the mission as a whole once combat forces have been withdrawn, specifically whether they perceive the mission as success or a failure. Certainly, a positive narrative would serve to bolster the future of 'out-of-area' operations, while the contrary would not. At present, the majority of allies would probably lean towards the latter. That said, much can happen between now and the end of 2014.

Towards a new mission

The end of the Cold War forced the Alliance to find a new mission in order to justify its continued existence. It was in this context that US Republican Senator, Richard Lugar coined his now infamous phrase, that NATO either go 'out-of-area' or out of business. The factors outlined above combine to suggest that a new mission for the Alliance is now needed. Indeed, the Alliance appears to have already reconciled itself with this fact and the contours of three possible future missions are beginning to emerge. The first is placing NATO at the heart of an international security network through strengthened partnerships with relevant countries and international organizations as a means to promote greater security and stability worldwide. Since the Obama administration took office in January 2009, there has been a deliberate 'reset' in US relations with Russia. This has formed part of a much broader 'reset' of relations with Russia over the last two years, which has included NATO-Russia relations. This 'reset' was evident at the NATO-Russia Council in Lisbon, which reached several significant decisions. Stronger relations with Russia is just one example of a wider network of ties that NATO seems set on building. The intention to place NATO at the heart of an international security network is clearly reflected in the new Strategic Concept. For the first time ever 'cooperative security' was explicitly identified as a core task and a number of undertakings were outlined to this end.

The second possible mission that NATO seems intent on rallying around is Ballistic Missile Defence. The new Strategic Concept warned that the conventional threat, although low cannot be ignored. In this regard, it identified the proliferation of ballistic missiles as a real and growing threat to the Euro-Atlantic area and the Alliance agreed to develop a ballistic missile defence system accordingly. The system will be based on the existing one (i.e. Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence), but be expanded to not only to protect deployed forces, but also the populations and territory of European allies.

The third possible mission is to focus allied attention on non-traditional threats. Recent developments suggest that NATO is increasingly trying to carve itself out a role in this regard. The new Strategic Concept clearly identifies non-traditional threats such as a terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber-attacks and the disruption of energy supplies as one of the main features of the contemporary security environment and calls the Alliance to further action accordingly. This followed on from a reshuffle at NATO HQ, which established a new division within the international staff in August 2010. The 'Emerging Security Challenges Division' currently employs around 50 members of staff and comprises 5 units, each dealing with one of the four non-traditional threats outlined above. The fifth unit focuses on strategic analysis. The possibility of focusing allied attention on non-traditional threats as a new mission could come unstuck however by the fact that there are arguably more suitable and appropriate institutions for addressing threats of this kind, notably the EU.

Conclusion

The new Strategic Concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, indicates that operations, like that presently underway in Afghanistan will remain on NATO's agenda in the near future. However, several factors combine to suggest that the Alliance will in fact shun entanglement in such missions. These factors include intra-allied divisions over the future direction of the Alliance itself, war fatigue among the political elite, the general public and the military in NATO member states, the cost of conducting such operations, insufficient spending on defence within the Alliance and the impact this on the transformation of allied forces to this end. Of course, the effects of the global financial crisis and the subsequent squeeze in public spending in most NATO member states has only served to increase the potency of the abovementioned factors. Another reason relates to the lessons, each ally, but especially the US will draw from the whole experience in Afghanistan. Finally, the endgame in Afghanistan also has the potential to significantly undermine the future of 'out-of-area' operations. The end of the Cold War forced the Alliance to find a new mission in order to justify its continued existence. 'Out-of-area' operations were seen in this context. The aforementioned factors therefore, combine to suggest that the Alliance now finds itself at a similar juncture and in need of a new rationale, around which the allies can unite. The Alliance appears to have recognized this need and is subsequently trying to carve itself out a role in several fields, including in the preservation of

international security and stability through enhanced partnerships, countering the heightened threat from ballistic missiles in addition to those of a non-traditional nature such as terrorism and cyber security.