

# Reinvesting in the Art of NATO

## *The President's Best Strategic Option*

David Abshire and S. Wesley Cross

International discourse about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has overlooked the organization's real potential and capability to tackle security challenges that the United States and Europe face today. Respected writers and publications have repeatedly misunderstood or misrepresented the United States's most valuable foreign policy instrument: the roundtable of its closest allies. NATO critics from the left and right on both sides of the Atlantic have declared NATO a Cold War dinosaur, chided it as a lackey of U.S. policy, or deemed it multilateral quicksand. E. Wayne Merry, a former U.S. diplomat and Soviet expert, blames NATO for transatlantic squabbling: "NATO is not the solution to this split; it is at the heart of the problem."<sup>1</sup> Joseph Jaffe, editor of the German weekly *Die Zeit*, issued an even harsher condemnation of NATO: "The Atlantic Alliance has been dying a slow death ever since Christmas Day 1991, when the Soviet Union committed suicide by dissolution. Having won the Cold War, the alliance lost its central purpose and began to crumble like a bridge no longer in use—slowly, almost invisibly."<sup>2</sup>

Similar beliefs have gained currency in some circles. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer noted this trend during his first visit to the United States in January 2004: "Over the past few months and years, some pernicious myths have

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started to become a little too popular. Myths that are undermining the foundation of our cooperation—trust.”<sup>3</sup> Ironically, this comes at a time when NATO has the opportunity to become the West’s first line of collective defense against terrorism, a common threat tragically underlined on 11 March 2004 in Madrid.

This rising challenge to NATO comes at a critical moment for world history, U.S. foreign policy, and transatlantic relationships. The United States now faces a moment of both extreme risk and opportunity. Over the next four years, the success or failure of U.S. foreign policy will likely set the course for the next fifty years. In an increasingly disordered international context of nuclear proliferation, terrorism, failed and rogue states, and fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military is stretched thin. Also, anti-Americanism is rising. The much-needed debate over U.S. foreign policy is complicated by a polarized domestic political culture and an election year that threatens to be particularly bruising.

If, at the Cold War’s end, NATO looked like an alliance in need of a mission, the United States’s challenges today—from fighting terrorism and nuclear proliferation to Middle East stability—now need an alliance. NATO should be that alliance. With skillful American leadership based on trust, consultation, and cooperation, NATO could regain its preeminent role in tackling transatlantic security problems. Recent events have begun persuading a Hobbesian United States and a Kantian Europe that when “facing long-term, strategic challenges, there can be no substitute for long-term, strategic partners: partners you can trust. Partners who trust you.”<sup>4</sup> NATO is the tool that best com-

bines the strengths of multilateral legitimacy and collaboration with the planning, capabilities, and operational effectiveness of unilateral action. No other option—neither unilateralism, nor the UN, nor even ad-hoc coalitions of the willing—is both viable over the long term and effective over the short term.

**The Misunderstood Alliance.** Two main myths dominate NATO discourse. The first myth portrays NATO as useful only in a Cold War context. In this view, the Soviet threat was the impetus and the main justification for the alliance. This myth upholds the second myth: NATO is unable to adapt to new challenges and lacks the capacity for perpetual and agile transformation. Yet NATO has repeatedly proven that it does have this capability. It remains without parallel among multilateral institutions, and this capability spans the history of the alliance.

These myths obscure the larger picture and overlook NATO’s history, successes, and potential. First, they misjudge the factors underlying the NATO mission and the depth of the alliance. NATO’s creation was motivated by multiple factors, not by a defensive reaction to the communist threat. One significant motivating factor was creating a security alliance of countries who shared common ideals. NATO countries share ideals of “freedom, common heritage, and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.”<sup>5</sup> These values granted NATO a political *raison d’être* for European and transatlantic unity.

Although unity guaranteed each member’s security, the alliance’s first mission was political. Europeans had waged countless internal wars culminating in two world wars that required American

intervention and an enormous loss of life. NATO constitutes a strategic response to this unstable reality. By marshalling member resources and acting in concert, NATO gained power and influence for the purpose of maintaining peace and protecting freedom. It united the former warring powers of Europe and moored them to North America.

Second, the myths underrate the organization's successes. After ideological unity, NATO's second mission was defense. Transatlantic ideological unity created a formidable foundation for employing defense resources against the Warsaw Pact and Soviet aggression. By maintaining unity and adapting to meet new threats, NATO was vital to winning the Cold War. It was one of the great accomplishments in political history: NATO prevailed without armed conflict. By averting another major European—and possibly world—war, NATO achieved what the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu described as perfect victory.

Finally, the myths discount NATO's potential for future success. NATO possesses remarkable capacities for both geographical and functional transformation. NATO's geographic expansion illustrates this. Compare its founding members to its membership today: from the original

alliance, aspiring countries were required to: settle internal or external territorial disputes peacefully; demonstrate a commitment to the rule of law and human rights; establish democratic control of armed forces; and promote stability and well-being through economic liberty, social justice, and environmental responsibility.

While geographic transformation resulted from geopolitical shifts, functional transformation has resulted from internal examination and outside critique. In some instances, the alliance outpaced its own members. As Chairman of the Armed Services Committee in 1987, U.S. Senator Sam Nunn asserted that NATO's strategic transformation was ahead of the Department of Defense in developing an integrated threat assessment, a conceptual framework, and a defense resources investment strategy. Throughout its history, the alliance has undergone many transformations revitalizing its strength and purpose. The most successful of these include the Three Wise Men, the Harmel Report, CCMS Harmel II, the 1986 Conceptual Framework and Resources Strategy, the Partnership for Peace, the 1999 Strategic Concept, and U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's NATO Response

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twelve members, the alliance grew to fourteen in 1952, fifteen in 1955, sixteen in 1982, and nineteen members in 1999. It welcomed seven more in 2004. With each new member, NATO has not only added new arrows to its quiver but also spread democratic values. To enter the

Force and the Allied Command Transformation. Each functional shift reshaped NATO to confront new security challenges and strengthened the alliance's political foundation and cohesion. NATO's political foundation and transformational capacity transcend the

end of the Cold War and the onset of the war on terrorism. In times of division and controversy, NATO's extensive machinery—negatively connoted a bureaucracy—is one that deft U.S. leadership can employ effectively to engage member nations. This is a forum where a U.S. representative can successfully move an agenda both bilaterally and multilaterally by lobbying positions, obtaining information, and building trust.

### **NATO As Consultative Body.**

NATO is the ideal forum for U.S. leadership, particularly in today's troubled times. Unilateralism breeds mistrust over time, lacks the benefits of financial burden-sharing, and profits from none of the complementary capabilities that NATO allies offer. NATO also comes with benefits not available at the UN Security Council. The Security Council lacks a consensus on values and has no intricate consultative mechanisms to adjust positions on contentious issues. Although it is not a panacea, NATO can be a linchpin of U.S. foreign policy.

The NATO framework enables the United States to consult intimately among allies and communicate its foreign policy in a multilateral forum. Although each NATO country has veto power, the United States is "first among equals." The United States wields enormous political, military, economic, and technological power that can be used to leverage the U.S. position. In many major challenges that confront the United States and its allies, the United States should better articulate how its own national interests are often congruent with those of its allies.

Nonetheless, on especially divisive issues, individual member countries can prove difficult to persuade. Yet this reti-

cence is often to their own detriment; it erodes their long-term influence. When France pulled out of the integrated command in 1966, NATO headquarters left Paris, making Brussels the security capital of Europe. More recently, France led the European protest against the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; by doing so, France divided Europe. In terms of French strategic influence, both policies seem Pyrrhic victories at best. More often than not, whether it is the United States or France, any member country that fundamentally violates the political will of the alliance decreases its own power and diminishes its own influence.

As majority shareholder in a consultative process, the United States should recognize that its own long-term interests call for taking into account the opinions and concerns of its closest allies, even if consultation ultimately serves only to better explore the United States's own policies. At NATO, such consultations are not a drive to the lowest common denominator, nor a prescription for debate without deadlines. They are an opportunity to seize the higher ground through powers of persuasion and create unity of effort and concert of action. This kind of leadership, not unilateralism, will ultimately build enduring power and influence.

### **NATO's Unique Structure.**

NATO's structure allows allies to consult in a way unmatched in other international organizations. Nowhere else can the United States meet *tête-à-tête* with twenty-six of its closest allies on the ambassadorial level twice weekly, once at the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and once at an intimate weekly lunch. Permanent representatives, on call twenty-four hours a day, enjoy the support of their

country's best military and diplomatic staff. The NAC brings together heads of government and foreign and defense ministers. At NAC meetings and the bilateral talks that surround it, formality

communications and weapons interoperability. The Committee of National Armaments Directors, which during the late 1980s included Deputy Defense Ministers, meets to muster political

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## **With skillful** U.S. leadership based on trust and consultation, NATO could regain its role in tackling transatlantic security problems.

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is minimal and conversation is frank and direct. Issues discussed are not limited to immediate Euro-Atlantic concerns but can range the world over. For example, in the 1980s, the U.S. permanent representative shared American analyses of the Iraq-Iran War with the NAC.

NATO enables top defense officials to meet regularly through the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Committee. Attended by top military leaders, these high-level meetings have made NATO a training ground for practicing allied military leadership of joint commands. Decisions by the two Supreme Allied Commanders of Europe and the Atlantic, known respectively as SACEUR and SACLANT, give the United States opportunities for leadership on operational and political fronts. Starting with the first SACEUR, General Dwight Eisenhower, the position is often held by American officers who develop influence with allied leaders. The Kosovo operation proved the effectiveness of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander leadership. In this case, the greatest tensions existed not within the alliance but between the SACEUR and the Defense Department about use of ground forces.

NATO military planning staffs maximize defense capabilities by fostering

influence in armaments strategy cooperation. In the 1970s, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Bill Perry and General Bernard Rogers, who later became SACEUR, developed the follow-on forces weapons systems that brilliantly won the Gulf War in 1991.

NATO's international staff, led by the secretary general, is invaluable. Numerous NATO secretaries general—notably Hastings Ismay, Joseph Luns, Peter Carrington, Manfred Woerner, and George Robertson—have been sympathetic to U.S. policy and remained close to U.S. ambassadors and ministers. This contrasts with the positions taken by UN secretaries general, who are often less sympathetic to American goals.

**NATO's Record of Success.** Experience suggests that when American leadership creatively and skillfully employed NATO instruments of power and persuasion, the alliance has proven both agile and creative.

The 1984-85 crisis over missile counter-deployment illustrates the alliance's potential under balanced American leadership. In 1979, the Soviet Union began to deploy intermediate range SS-20 missiles in an effort to conquer the alliance by shattering the

credibility of the transatlantic nuclear deterrent. Three NATO nations, influenced by the so-called “peace factions,” did not support the allied strategy to counter-deploy Pershing and cruise missiles. They argued that counter-deployments would provoke the Soviets and make them back away from arms

NATO’s success in fighting today’s greatest threat: terrorism. In the 1980s, terrorism struck at the heart of the alliance. Terrorists bombed the NATO Support Center and the North Atlantic Assembly Headquarters, assassinated a NATO three-star general on the *Champs Elysées*, bombed a bar in Greece where seventy

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control negotiations. The crisis was resolved under skillful American leadership, aided by the powerful U.S. Information Agency and a Special Consultative Group of political directors from member nations. This special group was a masterpiece of the consultative art in NATO. Under the chairmanship of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt, off-the-record sessions were convened out of the public limelight. Different positions were tested, trial balloons were launched, and the politics of deployment in each country were taken into consideration.

In a victory for both U.S. and NATO member national interests, the allies united to support counter-deployment. The Soviet Union initially broke off nuclear arms control negotiations, but quickly back-pedaled. Through consultation, persuasion, and unified effort, NATO turned a strategic corner in the Cold War, setting a course toward victory without a fight. NATO achieved a Cold War victory not by force of arms but by carefully orchestrating its collective will.

NATO’s success in fighting the Cold War is unquestionable, but few realize

U.S. servicemen were wounded, and bombed a West German bar where fifty Americans were wounded. When the United States concluded from intelligence that Libya, not the Soviet Union, was the source of this new threat, U.S. leadership engaged NATO to shore up weaker members who had unwittingly given terrorists free passage, naively believing those terrorist would never turn on them.

In January 1986, the United States broke all economic relations with Libya, evacuated American citizens from the country, and froze Libyan assets in the United States. President Ronald Reagan launched a diplomatic campaign for allies to do the same. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead was dispatched to the NAC to share intelligence and muster support. The head of the FBI came to Brussels for extended counterpart consultations, a first in NATO history. European Community (EC) foreign ministers passed a halfhearted resolution that lacked enforcement powers. When a bomb exploded onboard a TWA flight to Rome, U.S. officials cited convincing evidence of Libyan involvement to skept-



tical European ministers.

In cooperation with the United Kingdom, the United States struck Libya on 15 April 1986. The U.S. response initially excluded NATO, and U.S. officials said this strike had to be undertaken unilaterally to preserve agility in a region that was beyond NATO's traditional geographic focus.<sup>6</sup> After the strike, the U.S. permanent representative explained this independent action, the evidence against Libya, and how this related to NATO's counter-terrorism efforts in Europe to the full NATO Council. When some allies remained critical of the military action, the ambassador responded that U.S. military personnel were in Europe to maintain a collective commitment against common threats, and that terrorism now belonged in that category. An intense period of diplomatic activity ensued. Soon afterwards EC foreign ministers agreed to limit their diplomatic missions to Libya. President Reagan praised the EC ministers, and both sides began to heal political wounds. The NAC had illustrated a remarkable capacity to address differences and galvanize members to take action. The United States was able to effectively use NATO as a conduit to the EC, and a seemingly unilateral action evolved into a broadly-supported one.

**NATO's Value Added Today.** The 1986 U.S. strike on Libya is one example of a coalition of the willing that maintained American freedom of action without eroding NATO's unity of effort. While the situation required a unilateral strike, unilateralism itself was not presented as a doctrine. The alliance successfully responded to a terrorist threat that foreshadowed the perils of today.

A day after al Qaeda's attacks in New York and Washington, European allies invoked Article V—in which any attack on one NATO member is viewed by all members as an attack on them—for the first time in NATO's history. This sent a remarkable political signal to the world. Unfortunately, the potential for American leadership to rally members behind U.S. interests dissipated through a U.S. response that unduly stressed "coalitions of the willing," leaving the impression that the United States was downgrading NATO's importance. This approach stood in stark contrast to that adopted in the 1986 strike on Libya. After 9/11, better-honed U.S. leadership would have stressed the centrality of a concerted NATO effort to fight terrorism. The United States could, of course, continue resorting to coalitions of the willing inside or outside the alliance as new scenarios arose. Unfortunately, allies perceived a shift in American political and military priorities away from NATO. The United States missed an opportunity to mobilize the alliance with real leadership and keep France and Germany more positively engaged.

Today, the opportunity for American outreach and coalition-building in NATO extends far beyond member states. NATO has moved into an impressive stage of political dynamism; it is feasible to address threats beyond NATO's traditional geographical area. For instance, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council brings together forty-six NATO members and partners to consider cooperation and current political and security questions. The NATO Russia Council encourages dialogue, deepens trust, and enables former enemies to explore where interests converge in a new spirit of cooperation. The Mediterranean Dia-

logue convenes seven non-NATO Mediterranean countries to examine regional security and stability, achieve mutual understanding, and dispel misconceptions about NATO among those countries.<sup>7</sup> These should be key multilateral complements to U.S. diplomacy as it addresses military and political challenges in the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.

The political will and creativity of NATO's leaders will determine the organization's future influence. NATO already plays an important role in Afghanistan, where it is led by France and Germany, and it should play a role in Iraq as security conditions improve. NATO could certainly play a role in an Arab-Israeli settlement, as Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner suggested. Meanwhile, other major democratic powers, notably Japan and Australia, could appoint an ambassador to the organization just as the United States appointed an ambassador to the EU. As a new NATO initiative in the war on terror, the United States should build connections between the NAC and its Secretary of Homeland Security, and directors of FBI and CIA to further common standards and compare best practices. The NAC could energize issues that have been stymied in negotiations with the EU. NATO is fertile ground for imaginative solutions.

In the U.S. pursuit for sustainable

influence, NATO's consultative processes could become more powerful than the sum of their parts.

**Reinvesting in the Art of NATO Leadership.** The United States must dispel myths and reaffirm trust among allies by reinvesting in the consultative arts of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It must lead allies to do the same. Together, NATO allies must pave new avenues for meaningful, concrete consultation. These instruments will only be worth as much as members invest in them. Each member country must heed the words that grace the walls of the NAC, *animus in consulendo liber*: in consultation, a free mind.

The United States must beware of consistently appearing to go it alone. Such an attitude can be ammunition for U.S. enemies, such as al Qaeda, who seek to divide the United States and its allies. A style that emphasizes consultation in good faith will improve perceptions of the United States abroad. In an election year, the United States should seize the opportunity to set a new course by approaching new challenges from a position of principled, realistic strength, and using consultative fora to unite efforts and marshal resources. With proper leadership, NATO is the only tool that combines the political foundation, operational capability, and transformational creativity to do precisely that.

#### NOTES

1 E. Wayne Merry, "Therapy's End - Thinking Beyond NATO," *The National Interest* no. 74 (2003/2004).

2 Josef Joffe, "Continental Divides," *The National Interest* no. 71 (2003).

3 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, speech given at National Defense University, 29 January 2004.

4 Lord George Robertson, foreword to *Opening*

*NATO's Door* by Ronald Asmus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

5 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The North Atlantic Treaty* (Washington, D.C., 1949).

6 David Abshire, *Preventing World War III* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 84.

7 The non-NATO countries are: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia.