

Strategic Insight

Military Strategy for Transformation: NATO's Rubicon

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December 2, 2003

The need for transformation is well known and articulated at NATO Headquarters. As NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson stated in November 2003, "I put it bluntly, the overwhelming part of the (Alliance's) soldiers are useless for the kind of missions we are mounting today. In other words, the non-U.S. NATO countries have lots of soldiers, but far too few of them can be deployed."^[1] Despite intense American and NATO pressure for European military reform, and acknowledgement of the need for reform in several European capitals, the European Allies have been slow to make the required adaptations. This *Strategic Insight* argues that unless real progress is made in the transformation of NATO forces, the ever-widening gap between U.S. and European defense capabilities threatens the coherence of the Alliance and its effectiveness as a force for stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Transformation Scorecard

NATO has a mixed record in adapting to the rapidly changing situation of the post-Cold War world. On the positive side, the Alliance made a rapid reorientation after the fall of the Soviet Union. Fearing a potential wave of instability and crisis resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sixteen NATO heads of state set the Alliance along a new strategic path during the NATO summits of 1991 and 1994. Although NATO no longer faced a direct threat to its territory (a threat being defined as an entity holding both the intention and capability to threaten the sovereignty or vital interests of a NATO member), it did not believe that its mission was complete, as some observers suggested at the time. Rather, the Allies agreed that the alliance ought to continue because they continued to face security risks. These risks primarily threaten order and stability: ethnic conflict, mass population migration, economic disturbances, ecological disasters, terrorist activity, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

To meet this new environment, NATO members redirected the political and military arms of the alliance to reach out to former adversaries—including Russia—to promote cooperation, dialogue and transparency in military operations and defense spending. In 1994 this effort was formalized in the Partnership for Peace (PfP), an organization that European non-NATO nations could each separately join to work with NATO on interoperability, peacekeeping, search and rescue, and humanitarian operations.^[2] PfP was not a collective security organization. Partner members did not receive assurances that NATO would protect them in times of aggression. The fledgling democracies desired more. What began as a whisper rose to a clamor for the Alliance to embrace new members. Russia at first objected. It hinted at a resumption of the Cold War and even speculated on the difficulty of keeping a peace when NATO expanded to the very border of Mother Russia.^[3] The shrillest of these voices reminded the world that Russia still possessed nuclear weapons.^[4]

With the release of the Enlargement Study in 1995, NATO announced it would invite new members at some point. The study made clear that the purpose of enlargement was to foster security, stability and prosperity for those nations seeking to join the community of free-market democracies.^[5] Since that time, three new members—Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—have joined the Alliance and seven more have been invited and are expected to sign the Protocols of Accession in 2004.^[6] Russia, under the steady influence of President Vladimir Putin, has so far remained relatively quiescent throughout the process.^[7]

Clouds on the Horizon

Despite the initial success of transformation into a twenty-first century organization, NATO showed some underlying weaknesses in the late 1990s—especially during the Kosovo conflict. U.S. assets conducted most of the combat air operation of 1999 against the Serbian and Yugoslav forces in Kosovo because of the inability of European members to integrate with the high-tech U.S. Air Force. This disparity in capabilities extended beyond air operations to land and maritime components as well. Even more critical, NATO lacked the key intelligence and command and control mechanisms to wage modern war.

Closing the capabilities gap between Europe and America was going to require investment and long-term planning at a time when many European politicians believed that they no longer faced an acute security threat, and thus they were free to spend money on domestic priorities. The U.S. initiative to address the problem of skewed military capabilities was termed the Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI). This was to be a systematic way of prioritizing key areas for improvement such as deployability, mobility, sustainability and survivability of forces. DCI made strides toward identifying and quantifying the shortfalls in capabilities, but the task of narrowing the divide proved daunting. In fact, as U.S. defense expenditures rose, European spending fell, and the gap grew larger.^[8]

On the eve of the 2002 NATO Summit in Prague, when it was clear DCI had not achieved the high aims set for it four years earlier, NATO changed directions and adopted a new program, the Prague Capability Commitment (PCC). Building on the experience from DCI, the PCC sought more concrete commitments from nations in specific areas. The PCC adopted new approaches to encourage nations to form multinational efforts and combine resources. Early indications are promising that real progress may be achieved in areas critical to military transformation, such as strategic lift and air-to-air refueling. But the success of PCC is still uncertain as the major expenditures underlying the robust political assertions are still in the future.

The Nature of NATO

In addition to a short-term domestic reluctance to invest in long-term military modernization, at least part of the perceived sluggishness of NATO's transformation can be found in the structure of NATO's decision-making mechanisms. First and foremost is the requirement for consensus for any policy issue to become effective. Every Alliance member must agree in order for consensus to be reached on any proposed policy. This procedure worked well enough when the Alliance faced a real threat of invasion by a hostile power. The unanimity of sixteen nations in defense policy served as an awesome deterrent. But the challenges of the post-Cold-War environment are more complex and controversial. NATO found it relatively easy during the Cold War to agree on preparations for collective defense against an obviously menacing superpower. But recent NATO operations, such as the bombing of the Bosnian Serbs in 1995 or the Kosovo air campaign, tend to be discretionary in nature and thus more difficult to agree upon.

To be fair, part of the problem is inherent in the nature of a collective defense institution. To the extent NATO acts in the name of its member nations, those members will quite naturally show caution in what they allow the organization to do on their behalf. The more freedom NATO has as an independent entity, the more likely the chance it may run afoul of certain national positions. The accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Serbia in 1999 is a case in point. Although Chinese ire was directed primarily at the

United States, each Alliance member is potentially responsible for what NATO forces do under a North Atlantic Council mandate.

Drastic Times Call for . . . Moderate Measures

The starting point for a military strategy must be the reality of the situation: reform will be limited because the countries that make up NATO are constrained by competing demands for domestic spending from making the long-term investments that would be required to achieve the ideal results of transition. Any European government that proposed a substantial increase in defense spending would not last long in office. Therefore, any military changes must be politically and economically acceptable to the home governments.

Despite the draw-down of the past thirteen years, European nations of the Alliance still maintain a relatively large military force structure, reflecting a higher percentage of the population in uniform than that of the United States. With 2.8 million men and women in their armed forces, the European members of NATO retain more military manpower than the United States (1.4 million) and Russia (1.2 million) combined.^[9] Most of these structures are euphemistically referred to as "in-place forces", meaning they cannot deploy or sustain themselves away from their home base.^[10]

Although transforming this huge quantity of military force in its entirety is beyond the means of even the most willing society,^[11] a more realistic approach would be to concentrate on a small number of highly capable and deployable formations, while gradually reducing the active force structure. How much does NATO really need in the way of force structure in order to defend itself and provide needed stability to the North Atlantic region? Consider that the United States and the United Kingdom recently defeated Saddam Hussein's half million-man army in twenty-one days with a relatively small but technologically superior joint force, a result that seems to argue in favor of modernization and against maintaining large, obsolete land forces.

Critical approaches to a transformational mindset include:

- *Focus on Expeditionary Capabilities.* NATO has actually made significant progress in the area of improving its expeditionary capabilities. The creation of high readiness deployable headquarters and the creation of the NATO Response Force are clearly examples of success in this area.^[12] But the overwhelming majority of European forces remain non-deployable, and serve to drain resources away from further transformation. The argument against in-place forces is one of scale rather than a recommendation for their complete elimination. However, the legitimate uses of forces for internal stability, disaster relief, riot control, etc, would hardly justify the some two million soldiers in this category for NATO's European members. These in-place forces should be cut and the money saved redirected to transformational initiatives.
- *Define the End-State.* The hard work of transforming Alliance capabilities and forces must be seen to be working toward some well-defined and understood end-state, or it risks losing support of the home governments who will by necessity have to justify increased expenditures to their voting publics. Currently, NATO uses a multi-year force planning process to identify requirements and seek commitments from member nations based on politically approved level of ambition and updated threat assessments. Although this provides maximum flexibility for NATO as an organization, the fluctuation in requirements makes national planning more difficult than it would otherwise be with fixed targets. NATO should describe the face of the reformed Alliance in terms that both demonstrates its value and allows a consensus to develop for reaching intermediate steps. Without this vision, nations may be tempted to cut antiquated force structure without redirecting resources into needed transformational capabilities.
- *Understand the Cost.* Military transformation, especially the kind which European militaries require in order to close the gap with the United States, will be expensive and institutionally difficult to implement. The savings from cutting in-place forces will not be enough to pay for the required initial expenditures in the area of transformation. These costs should be identified and

articulated up front, allowing national home governments to plan for them in budgetary terms and to manage the political consequences.

- *Accept Risk.* Transformation requires the acceptance of risk on a number of fronts. These risks should be defined, articulated and accepted from the beginning. First, the significant drawdown on in-place forces will unsettle those in the defense community who are both institutionally linked to the status quo and who continue to believe large land armies will be required for territorial defense at some point in the future. NATO planners should clarify these risks so that they can be openly discussed, thus allowing informed decisions to be made at the political level.
- *Reform the System.* One of the major problems for any institutional reform is the tendency to allow the decision-making organizations that will be most affected by any new reform to be the party that controls the process and debate about that reform. Both NATO Headquarters and the national capitals engaged in defense reform will need to be aware of this tendency and ensure the right structures are modified or created in order to give impetus to reform initiatives.[\[13\]](#)

Requiem or Prologue?

Through a combination of strategic vision and energetic leadership, NATO so far has taken the first necessary steps toward needed reform. But as the Alliance moves further into the first decade of the twentieth century, it faces its own Rubicon. It must continue transforming in order to be relevant as a stabilizing force for security in the North Atlantic area and beyond. That transformation will require a level of effort and an expenditure of resources that will test the endurance of wealthy and complacent societies.

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References

1. NATO Secretary General George Robertson, [Speech](#) given in Berlin, 3 Nov 2003, .
2. NATO 1994 Ministerial [Communiqué](#).
3. Boltuc Piotr, "Russia and Stability in Europe and Asia, " in *Post Communist States in the World Community: Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies, Warsaw, 1995*, ed. William E. Ferry and Roger E. Kanet (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 62-83.
4. According to Thomas Skold and Sharon Riggie, "Since the last round of expansion, Russia has responded with increased military activity in Kaliningrad, and some Duma members are threatening to turn the Russian enclave into a nuclear equipped 'unsinkable air-craft carrier'. Another threat from Moscow suggests revision of the nuclear weapons targeting plan to include the Baltic states if they join NATO." Thomas Skold and Sharon Riggie, "[NATO Enlargement: Embedding the Nuclear Reliance](#)," *Global Beat*, 1 May 2001.
5. [NATO Enlargement Study](#), 1995.
6. Invited members are Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria.
7. The period of Russia's acquiescence to NATO enlargement may be coming to and end. A Russian Defense Ministry paper released on 2 October 2003 "warned that Russia might have to revise its plans for military reform and nuclear strategy if NATO did not drop what it termed its 'anti-Russian orientation.'" As quoted in Simon Sardzhyan, "[Putin: Missiles To Be Put on Combat Duty](#)," *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 October 2003.
8. The three year (2000, 2001, 2002) defense expenditure trend for European NATO nations was 2.1 percent, 2.0 percent, and 2.0 percent, respectively. For the US during the same three year period: 3.1 percent, 3.1 percent, and 3.3 percent. NATO, [Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defense, Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries \(1980 - 2002\)](#).
9. NATO figures are drawn from table 6, [NATO Press Release M-DPC-2 \(2002\) 139](#), 20 Dec 2002. Russian numbers are drawn from "[Numerical Strength of Russia's Armed Forces](#)," *Johnson's Russia List*, 9 Jan 2003.
10. In Place Forces (IPF) should not be confused with the concept of forward deployed forces of the Cold

War. The latter term connoted an immediate readiness to deploy for sustained combat and to fight from prepared positions. IPF, on the other hand, more commonly refers to forces that cannot deploy or sustain themselves. As there is virtually no risk that they will be attacked where they are stationed, they have severely limited military utility.

11. On 8 October 2003, NATO Secretary General, Lord Robinson stated, 'Now so long as you have so many unusable soldiers, then taxpayers are being ripped off. It is a bad bargain for the taxpayers when they expect usable, deployable, survivable, well-equipped troops to be available to deal with each and every crisis that they are called upon to deal with. And yet we don't have them.'

12. See Stephen Mariano and Brendan Wilson, "[NATO Response Force, Political Deftness, Economic Efficiency, Military Power](#)," *Strategic Insight*, April, 2003.

13. For an excellent insight into institutional reform in modern international military operations, see Giandomenico Picco, "[Balancing Bureaucracy and the Individual: Institutional Reform and Peace Operations](#)," *Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2002).