

ISSUEBRIEF

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NATO, Terrorism and Irregular Threats

Today's NATO is not the NATO of the Cold War. Nor is it even the NATO of just a decade ago. If the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and then the USSR were not enough to fundamentally alter the geopolitical reality the Alliance found itself in, then the events of September 11, 2001 should be considered an evolutionary marker in the development of modern history's "most successful" alliance.

It bears remembering what NATO's primary mission was between 1949 and 1990, and what scenario the drafters and eventual signers of the Washington Treaty had in mind all those years ago. As Lord Ismay, the first Secretary General of the Alliance is supposed to have famously summarized it,¹ the simple explanation was that the nations of the transatlantic community needed an institutional instrument to deter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, to keep U.S. forces on the continent and to keep West Germany on the path of democratic development following World War II.

To meet those ends, NATO's very brief charter, under Article 5, bound members together in a relationship of collective defense whereby if one ally were attacked, all were required to consider the attack as against themselves and were expected to respond. Of course, while the 14 paragraphs of the Washington Treaty did not mention by name the threat of Communist expansion or the Soviet Union, the collective defense scenario envisaged was an attack by the USSR and its client states against the nations of Western Europe, an attack that could only be deterred or defeated through the commitment of U.S. military might on the European continent and, potentially, through the use of nuclear weapons.

The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft, and Fred Kempe, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

The SAG and its activities are generously sponsored by the Scowcroft Group, EADS North America, and Airbus.

For more than half a century this political and military commitment – backed up by the creation of NATO command structures, doctrines and war plans – did what it was meant to do. NATO's enemy, the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, was deterred and World War III was averted. Furthermore, on Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist as formerly captive nations and new countries emerged out of the former Communist empire to be welcomed into the community of independent states. All this was achieved without one shot being fired across the Fulda Gap or through the Iron Curtain.

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A World Turned Upside Down

After the loss of its foe, the NATO member states did not renegotiate the Washington Treaty. The Alliance did, however, move into new areas and missions, most specifically in relation to the Balkans and the role NATO assumed under the Dayton Accords. Although Article 5 and its collective defense commitment were never invoked during the decades of the Cold War, this would change ten years after the *annus mirabilis* that ended the bipolar world order.

NATO's founding fathers and the drafters of the Washington Treaty wrote Article 5 with a very specific contingency in mind. Allies were committed to act on the principle of collective defense should the USSR and the Warsaw Pact satrapies use overwhelming force to invade and conquer the militarily weaker states of Western Europe. Article 5 was premised on the scenario of a conventional military attack by a bloc of nation-states against America's European allies. On September 12, 2001, the reality of the article's first-ever invocation was very different. The day before it was the United States – not a European ally – which had been attacked. The attack employed non-military, unconventional means, and was executed not by a nation-state, but by a non-state actor, the terrorist group al Qaeda.² NATO has therefore been redefined by external reality and new actors. In drafting its new Strategic Concept, it must recognize the new irregular nature of these enemies and the threat they comprise.

NATO's Purpose

The Soviet Union has ceased to be. Conventional military conflict between the nations of Europe seems very unlikely for many reasons. NATO is now involved in operations that have nothing to do with its original mission and is active in areas well beyond the geographical mandate of its founding charter. NATO therefore clearly has value, if only based upon its capabilities as an organization uniquely capable of responding to security challenges beyond the borders of its members. But to survive and prosper it must go further. Its members must answer the questions: what is NATO for in a decidedly post-Cold War world?

As any student of grand strategy will confirm, countries and organizations cannot position themselves in the world without starting by defining their values and what they stand for. This was true for NATO's founding members in 1949 and

it remains true today. NATO was not created because the Soviet Union was an aggressive and expansionist nation. It was created because the Soviet Union posed a threat to the values which were shared by the nations that created the Alliance. Without all the shared values upon which democracy is built, there would have been no alliance to create.

Those core values still obtain today. It is no accident that as NATO responded to the events of 1990-91 with initiatives such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and the Partnership for Peace, the Alliance made it clear to all prospective partners that only those committed to "peace through democracy" were invited to join the community of nations that is the transatlantic alliance.³ In 1949 this community of values was a small one. Today it counts dozens of nations from North America to Western and Central Europe, the Balkans and beyond. Logically, then, since the USSR and Warsaw Pact no longer threaten our community, the question is: who does?

The New Threat

Clearly there are nations who do not share the political and moral values of NATO's member states. The variety among them is great, from mid-sized quasi-dictatorships in Europe, such as Belarus, to island states in the Caribbean, such as Cuba, to gargantuan powerhouses such as the People's Republic of China. None of these poses a conventional military threat to NATO. Whether they pose unconventional challenges is another matter entirely. In a world of deeply interconnected financial markets and national infrastructures controlled almost exclusively by privately owned information technology networks, it is not tank regiments on the border that provide the first sign of impending attack to one's national interests. To make matters even more complicated, the Alliance can no longer afford the luxury of focusing its threat assessments solely upon nations, or groups of nations.

Ten years ago al Qaeda's core membership was measured by the dozen. As an organization, its budget was in the low millions of dollars. Despite these facts, despite having capabilities that would be dwarfed by even the smallest NATO country and its army, this enemy managed to achieve that which the Soviet Union was never able to accomplish: mass murder on the soil of the world's only superpower.

September 11, 2001 was an abject lesson in how the geostrategic metrics of power have been rewritten.

Today an organization can pose a far greater threat to any one NATO nation than the countries the Alliance has trained for decades to fight with conventional means and methods. As a result, NATO must collectively take a new look at the strategic landscape.

- The members of the Alliance must reaffirm openly the values shared by its members which originally drove the creation of NATO and its principle of collective defense.
- Secondly, it must declare that NATO's enemies today are defined by those that would seek to undermine these values, just as the USSR sought to do. However, NATO allies must do so while recognizing the great change that has occurred since April 1949.
- As an alliance, its members must communicate to their citizens and to the wider global audience that today those that threaten its core values do so in unconventional and irregular ways and they are not solely other states.

Grand strategy may be built on common sense, but not on conventional wisdom. **It is necessary for NATO member states to be explicit in their new threat assessments. Collective defense still stands. It is the nature of the enemy and how it may attack member states that has changed.** As 9/11, the London attacks of 7/7 and the Madrid atrocities attest, World War III is not the danger we face. The United States has formally recognized this with its latest Joint Operating Concept for Irregular Warfare, which states that "future adversaries are more likely to pose

irregular threats."⁴ This holds for all NATO members. Additionally, the Alliance should also demonstrate to the world that it understands that nations which do not share its values can also threaten its members in unconventional ways which have little to do with military offensives in the classic sense (the cyber attack on Estonia being a perfect example).

NATO was always more about values than military might – that is what separated it from the Warsaw Pact. Those values still hold true. Now it is the duty of its members to prepare to defend them from new enemies using new tactics.

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STRATCON 2010

The Strategic Advisors Group's STRATCON 2010 project seeks to shape and inform the transatlantic debate over NATO's new Strategic Concept. STRATCON 2010 will issue publications to define the critical issues NATO must confront in drafting a new Strategic Concept. For more information about the SAG or STRATCON 2010, please contact Vice President and Director of the Program on International Security Damon Wilson at dwilson@acus.org or Program Associate Director Jeff Lightfoot at jlightfoot@acus.org.

¹ A potentially apocryphal statement: "NATO was founded to keep the Americans in, the Germans down and the Soviets out," is notoriously difficult to pin down historically. See the interview with historian and Norwegian Nobel Committee Secretary Geir Lundestad: *Europe since World War II* at: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people5/Lundestad/lundestad-con2.html>

² For a discussion of the ramifications of the invocation of Article 5, see S. L. v. Gorka "Invocation of Article Five: five years on," *NATO Review*, Summer 2006.

³ See PfP Framework Document and Invitation at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24469.htm?selectedLocale=en http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24468.htm

⁴ For a detailed examination of the ramifications of the rise of irregular threats see T. A. Marks, S. L. v. Gorka & Robert Sharp: "Beyond Population-Centric Warfare", *PRISM*, Vol. 1 Issue 3, Summer 2010, pp.79-90.

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