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Is NATO Set to Go on Standby?

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While the withdrawal of all combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 will be welcomed in most NATO capitals, it raises stark questions for the future of the Atlantic Alliance. Can it justify its existence without a direct threat to the security of its members? Is it enough for NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to state that the Alliance has to evolve from "deployed NATO to prepared NATO," without answering the question: prepared for what? Or will NATO have to accept that it is now less relevant, placing itself in standby mode to hibernate until it is reawakened by a new mission inside or outside Europe?

Post-Afghanistan: The Downside

The end of NATO's combat operations in Afghanistan will certainly prove a turning point for most members of the Alliance. Their strategic thinking, military planning, force structures, organization, and weapons systems procurement have been crucially affected by NATO's decade-long mission in the Hindu Kush. Admittedly, the military contribution of many countries fighting alongside the United States in Afghanistan was comparably small. Still, it was significant due to the fact that most of these countries–except the United Kingdom and France–neither reallocated military capabilities for expeditionary operations nor did they have a tradition of fighting beyond their national borders. In fact, even many defense budgets were saved from public criticism and from further cuts by underlining the relevance of the Afghanistan mission for the security of the Euro-Atlantic community. In a number of parliamentary debates in Europe, defense ministers pointed to the necessity of military procurement in order to equip "our boys abroad" with the best technology available to protect their lives and to help them achieve their difficult missions. In addition, it was the long and daunting fight against the Taliban that helped many European countries to expand their Eurocentric security policy horizon of the past to a global, twenty-first century perspective. Lastly, those

NATO in an Era of Global Competition

NATO is emerging from more than a decade of war in Afghanistan and is faced with unprecedented shifts in the world order, new global challenges, and severe fiscal constraints. Against this backdrop, the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security and the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS) launched the *NATO in an Era of Global Competition* project to provide recommendations for policymakers across the Alliance as they chart an appropriate strategic orientation for the world's most important political-military Alliance.

Working with recognized experts, government representatives and military officials from Europe, Canada, and the United States, this project will produce a set of issue briefs informed by multiple public and private events. The project also aligns with NATO's major priorities as the Alliance prepares for its 2014 "transformation" summit. For more information about this effort, please contact Scowcroft Center Associate Director Simona Kordosova at skordosova@AtlanticCouncil.org.

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in Europe not familiar with expeditionary combat operations experienced the downside of military crisis management by paying their toll in blood and treasure. Almost all NATO members took casualties and managed to justify these losses vis-à-vis their respective publics. Even if some countries were lucky enough to suffer only single digit casualties (in comparison to the United States with about 2,250 and the United Kingdom with 440 fatalities), the fact that countries were able to cope with losses gave the lie to academic hypotheses of allegedly "post-heroic societies," unable to suffer for their security interests. All NATO members plus their twenty-two partners stayed firm in Afghanistan from the very first day of the common engagement, and followed the principle of "in together, out together." Will this remarkable consensus and maturity in foreign policy crumble when NATO forces are no longer engaged in combat on a daily basis?

Other factors might affect the situation. The international financial crisis is not going to end soon. Particularly in many European countries, with shrinking and aging societies, inflexible labor markets, overwhelming national debts, and unimplemented economic reforms, the situation might become even worse before it improves. The mantra of mutual encouragement not to further cut defense budgets therefore seems pointless—most NATO nations will cut them all the same, despite the increasing gap between the Alliance's ambitions and available resources.

The rebalancing of US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region will certainly mean that Washington pays less attention to its NATO Allies in Europe. Washington's shift, however, is to be understood neither as an expression of an anti-European mood nor as a sign of American disengagement. To a considerable extent, it is a positive reflection on the high level of stability achieved by Europe, which has less and less unfinished business in security policy terms.

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Alas, despite its ambitious rhetoric Europe will not be able to compensate for the diminished US role and leadership in the Euro-Atlantic security space. The European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) exists only on paper, and there is no reason to assume that it will come to life in the near future. The Libya crisis might have seemed a perfect testing ground for the CSDP: it was in the European vicinity, and the United States had shown limited interest. But no European Union-led operations materialized. It seems equally futile to expect that the key European players like France, Germany, or the United Kingdom could get their acts together and make up for increasing US reluctance to provide leadership and military capabilities for NATO crisis management operations: even the "big three" lack common priorities, a common vision, or a common strategic culture. In addition, individual factors militate against a leadership role for these countries. France is in economic decline, and will take a long time to change track towards economic and societal reform. Germany, currently described as the "reluctant hegemon," is not willing to translate its economic dominance into political leadership. The United Kingdom seems currently at odds with itself on its international role in general, and its position vis-à-vis Europe in particular.

Despite these worrisome trends, however, there is no reason for NATO to fall into a post-Afghanistan depression nor an identity crisis.

NATO's Strengths in the Post-2014 World

NATO had its real identity crisis in the early 1990s, when the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, marking the end of the overarching Soviet threat, seemed to have deprived the Alliance of its *raison d'être*. The result was an agonizing debate on NATO's future roles and missions, culminating in the idea, particularly in European security circles, of transforming NATO into a subcontractor of the United Nations (UN) in order to justify its further existence. Nowadays, more than two

decades later, it is generally understood that NATO would be ill-suited to function as a world policeman or as a military arm of the UN. Moreover, it has become evident that NATO does not need any proxy functions to assure its survival: the Alliance exists primarily because twenty-eight member states want it to exist as a means of collective defense.

With the end of the Afghanistan mission, NATO loses one of its major occupations of recent times. However, for at least four reasons, the Alliance looks in a far better position today than it was after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

First, there is no compelling nexus between the justification of a political-military Alliance and ongoing combat missions: NATO does not need to be constantly engaged in military operations to prove what it is worth or why it is needed. What is fundamental for NATO is a rationale, in the form of common threats or challenges, that gives a reason for its existence. Such a rationale certainly exists, given the broad range of dangers to NATO members' security interests, from potentially escalating crises in the Middle East and Northern Africa, to the rise of nuclear powers like North Korea or Iran, and disruptive threats to critical computer networks. In other words, NATO's standing as a cost-effective and mutually advantageous instrument of protection, deterrence, and defense is undeniable, regardless of whether it is actually running military assignments at any given time. This holds all the more true as NATO has adapted in recent decades to deal with a broad spectrum of security challenges, extending well beyond the risk of direct military attacks on Alliance territory.

Second, in Afghanistan NATO has shown incredible political cohesion. Who would have seriously believed in 2001 that NATO Allies would stand together in Afghanistan for more than twice the duration of the Second World War? At the same time, the Alliance has also demonstrated its military capabilities, fighting for years on one of the world's most demanding battlefields: an extremely poor, landlocked country thousands of kilometers away with hardly any infrastructure. The result is that all NATO allies today have experienced and combat-hardened military forces.

There was also the experience of the Libyan campaign: NATO showed that it is capable not only of acting swiftly in reaction to an immediate crisis, but also of terminating a military operation in time and not allowing itself to be drawn down the slippery slope towards the quagmire of an endless engagement. Despite the complaints about lacking European capabilities in Libya in areas like intelligence and refueling capacities, NATO forces were much better equipped there than they would have been in a comparable situation in the early 1990s, and this difference would have been even clearer if all European NATO members had contributed militarily to the mission. It is therefore no coincidence that NATO is perceived from outside as the most successful (and most powerful) political-military alliance in history, despite its internal debates and navel gazing.

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Third, the basis of NATO—i.e., the transatlantic link, based on shared benefit—is still valid and persuasive to both the North Americans and the Europeans. Skeptics tend to point out that, with the generational changes on both sides of the Atlantic, the positive connotations of European-American friendship and the support for a transatlantic security alliance might fade away. In addition, it is sometimes claimed that NATO is being eroded by dwindling financial resources and increasing transatlantic debates over military spending, commitments, and burden sharing. According to such a view, the United States is becoming increasingly unwilling–and unable–to pay for the military shortcomings of its European allies.

Yet, the almost habitual NATO quarrels about burden sharing miss one crucial point: nations join and keep up an alliance not for altruistic reasons or nostalgia, but to serve their interests. Europe and North America don't invest in NATO to please each other, but because the mutual benefits outweigh the investments. NATO

was founded and kept up during the Cold War because it was advantageous for both sides of the Atlantic. The United States provided protection for Europe, whereas the European allies in turn guaranteed Washington's influence in Europe. Such a transatlantic bargain still exists, in a slightly different perspective. Through NATO, the United States guarantees its influence in today's Europe, a continent which is stable, prosperous (the Euro crisis notwithstanding, Europe's combined economy is greater than that of the United States), benign and, above all, politically like-minded. No other region in the world combines these attributes in a similar manner, and no other continent is open to such a strong US voice in its own affairs. Moreover, the European NATO members, all committed to transatlantic values and all firm democracies (even if some Southeastern European allies have to further mature in that respect), can provide political legitimacy for military actions conducted by the US beyond its own borders. Lastly, Europe remains a logistical hub for global US military operations.

Europe, in turn, benefits from the transatlantic security partnership in at least three respects. The United States still provides military protection (with conventional as well as nuclear forces) – a benefit which is of tremendous importance for many Eastern European NATO members. In addition, the United States protects the global commons, for instance, sea lines of communication and unlimited access to air and space. Finally, the United States is a decisive power of global order and stabilizes regions that are important for the European allies. Thus, for both sides of the Atlantic, membership in NATO means benefit sharing rather than burden sharing.

The fourth and final consideration is that, even if 2014 is a major turning point for NATO, the Alliance will not go out of business. Instead, it will do what it did before Afghanistan: stay militarily engaged in the Balkans or the Horn of Africa, conduct training exercises, plan for all kinds of contingencies, and continue to develop common standards and procedures. Furthermore, NATO members have the chance to consult on any emerging security problems and to assess means of collective or individual action. This possibility of preemptively taking on upcoming challenges is codified in Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Unfortunately, NATO allies have not always made use of these consultation mechanisms because some NATO members want to limit the Alliance primarily on its military dimension and try to avoid too many political debates in the North Atlantic Council. This shortcoming needs to be addressed. Finally, NATO members also will develop and advance their international partnership network with states and organizations, in order to cope with the realities of a globalized security environment.

No Standby Mode for NATO

What will happen to NATO's role and relevance after 2014? The Alliance arguably will lose importance in the concert of international institutions. As defense budgets shrink, so will military capabilities, meaning fewer standing forces and more reserves. Hopefully, NATO will keep up the "NATO Response Force" (NRF), not only as a rapid reaction capability but particularly as a resource for multinational exercises and to improve interoperability in the post-Afghanistan world.

Still, NATO will remain vital. In addition to the above-mentioned tasks (military planning, exercises, development of standards), the Alliance will focus on the task it was founded for: defending the security and the vital interests of its members. This might include contingencies far away from Europe. Three years after the approval of a new Strategic Concept, NATO's previous debates on Article 5 versus non-Article 5 missions, or expeditionary forces versus territorial defense, seem futile. A missile attack by North Korea on Alaska (given the waywardness of the regime in Pyongyang, this is hardly a far-fetched scenario) would be just as certain as a Syrian attack against Turkish territory to trigger an Article 5 response. Even beyond questions of collective defense regulated by Article 5, immediate action in order to protect vital interests can become necessary. For instance, should a war in the Middle East prompt Iran to block the Strait of Hormuz, NATO could not remain passive for the simple reason of not having suffered a direct attack. The same might hold true for devastating cyberattacks, or other violent disruptions of energy supply.

There is one branch of NATO's business, though, which will be significantly cut back. Of the three core tasks NATO defined in its 2010 Strategic Concept (collective self-defense, crisis management and cooperative security through partnerships), military crisis management will continue to lose significance. Financial scarcity and the sobering experiences of recent years—the attempts at nation-building in Afghanistan, or the lesson that even successful military interventions like that in Libya do not guarantee stable political development—will make NATO's military decision-makers even more risk-averse than at present. If asked by their political masters to advise on a potential military stabilization mission in the Middle East or in Northern Africa, they might tend more and more to caution against such action. The result of this will be a more risk-averse NATO, even when it comes to humanitarian operations. The situation in Syria, where today's civilian death toll is already significantly higher than on the eve of the intervention in Libya, is a case in point. If there is to be any likelihood of NATO acting militarily in response to humanitarian requirements, key interests of Alliance members must be at stake. NATO cannot simply be the default option in international crises or civil war situations, automatically responding to popular demand that "something" be done. In addition, as past experience has shown, those who are quickest to demand the intervention of the "international community" (and, in particular, NATO) in crisis regions are also likely to complain about military operations taking their toll in civilian casualties.

Despite NATO's increasing tendency not to engage in military crisis management operations, it is not going to hibernate in the post-Afghanistan world and simply wait for a new threat to arise. What will happen is that, after 2014, NATO will concentrate on its core competence: the protection of the Euro-Atlantic security space by political means, deterrence and defense. With the current proliferation of nuclear weapons, the spread of missile technology and the undoubted potential for devastating attacks on communication networks or for terrorist actions leveraging state-of-the-art technology, this is more than enough to justify NATO's existence.

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