



SPECIAL FEATURE

NATO at 60: A Reality Check

Alok Rashmi Mukhopadhyay

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Since the end of Cold War, the *raison d'être*, future and evolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been deliberated time and again. Especially after the short-lived Russia-Georgia War in August 2008, Western analysts are more concerned about the future of NATO than about a resurgent Russia. An overwhelming pessimism about NATO, its operations in Afghanistan and an imminent failure and withdrawal from there are recurrent themes of discussion in Western media and security circles. If the War in the Caucasus has posed a serious question on NATO's expansion programme in Europe, the continuous presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan is being discussed not only in European capitals but also in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan. Some European allies of NATO have already accepted that keeping their soldiers in Afghanistan has enormously increased the danger of terrorism at home. Not only the immediate concern of terrorism emanating from a part of the younger generation in Islamic communities in Europe but the inability to improve the security situation in Afghanistan is also being monitored by the global terrorist networks. Terrorist attacks against European forces have become a daily phenomenon in Afghanistan. These are compelling facts mainly for the Europeans to rethink about their ongoing strategy in Afghanistan as well as the leadership and effectiveness of NATO which they still consider as crucial for their security.

NATO: A Reality Check is imperative

The end of the Cold war saw a plethora of literature on the transformation of the transatlantic alliance. While Alyson Bailes talked about "The 'New' NATO,"¹ the most trendy formulation to be found is 'Global NATO'.² It is significant to underline that predominantly American academics and the NATO leadership have been in favour of the concept of 'Global NATO' which may act as a military tool of the 'coalition of democracies'. As former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson said in the context of the NATO expansion programme: "Through the enlargement and accession process, NATO encourages reforms that help to stabilise aspirant countries, and help them work co-operatively in security with NATO members. By formally taking in

countries that meet NATO's standards, the Alliance locks in that stability, while at the same time broadening the *permanent coalition of democracies* that the Alliance embodies."³ Julian Lindley-French enthusiastically announced in the context of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), "What is to become one of NATO's most challenging missions is born - International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). NATO is truly in the *global security business*." ⁴

Though the issues beginning from its existence, nomenclature, expansion and out-of-area operations have been debated threadbare, some normative questions keep arising. Is the alliance slowly but surely reaching a dead-end? Would the Alliance, which is based on shared transatlantic values and works on consensus, be able to maintain its coherence in the long run? Would the agenda of continuous expansion culminate in fatigue from over-stretching? If the US, in instances, goes on to form its own *Coalitions of Willing* without taking NATO into consideration, then what would be the response of the other allies? On the other hand, as happened in the wake of the Iraq War, vehement opposition from European leaders like former French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder led to renewed thinking on the issue of an independent European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). It is true that the resistance offered by Chirac and Schröder in 2003 against the US determination to wage war against Iraq was mainly from their respective national and political interests. While Chirac did not want to see France supporting the US on every issue, Schröder wanted to win the impending elections by exploiting the anti-Bush, anti-War public opinion prevailing in the continent and particularly in Germany. The transatlantic schism had to be smoothened by their successors, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. However, a vital question that the transatlantic divide of 2003 brought to the fore was whether the issue of strengthening NATO and/or devoting more energy and resource to constructing a European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) would keep changing depending upon the views of the leadership in major European countries? This question would lead to a further query, whether the ESDP would be used as a political tool by some European allies of NATO whenever they see that a certain US presidency cannot be convinced on some critical global security issues? These are the key questions that demand a reality check for NATO on the eve of the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit.

Since it is apparent that European analysts are mainly interested in a hyphenated EU/NATO endeavour to address global security challenges as well as those in the immediate neighbourhood, there is no need to reiterate the fact that the EU and the NATO are not the same. Both EU and NATO have undergone significant changes after the Cold War and through their enlargement process, though the United States continues to be the *primus inter pares* in NATO and the Franco-German core is still the deciding factor in the EU. However, both organizations are undergoing an inner transformation which amounts to a dilution of their West European core and points to the unpredictability of change. Yet, NATO is still a Euro-Atlantic alliance and despite grand pronouncements like 'Global NATO' it would still remain

focused on Euro-Atlantic security. However, we should also be aware of the fact that NATO's evolution, its activities and future should be seen as a dialectic process. While the Atlantic Alliance wants to include new members from its former target area within its fold in order to transform these countries, the inclusion of new members with their historical background and experience would also induce change in the nature of the Alliance.

NATO: Still a Euro-Atlantic Alliance

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, NATO for the first time in its history invoked Article 5 under which "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." The Istanbul Summit of NATO endorsed the Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC), which envisaged an improvement in "the Alliance's ability to take on operations whenever and wherever necessary." Article 5 and the PCC together make most non-NATO countries or regional neighbours where NATO is active today, uncomfortable about the intention of NATO and its possible search for pretexts for out-of-area operations. At the same time, one should not ignore the fact that Article 6 of NATO stipulates the geographical boundary of NATO specifically as "the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer."⁵ It must be highlighted here that at the time of NATO's inception, the global reality was different with European members of NATO still maintaining colonies in various parts of the world. But at the same time the world was also broadly divided into two camps and involving NATO in out-of-area operations might have led to a severe global crisis. Moreover, the danger from the East was largely focused on the North Atlantic area and thus the issue of out-of-area operations was never seriously considered. In effect, NATO began its out-of-area operations only after the Cold War was over, Russia was weak, Central and East European countries were eager to join NATO, and no other nation could match the military capabilities of the leader of this alliance.

With both EU and NATO expanding eastwards the coherence of the organisation seems to be getting diluted. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in the name of consensus NATO has become a debating society. On one hand, there is a Franco-German core and on the other there are the small Baltic nations and a large country like Poland; the security perceptions of new members are totally different from those of the older founder members. Differing perceptions and more recently divergent approaches to Counter-Terrorism between the US and some West European members are likely to hinder NATO from easily arriving at a consensus to launch out-of-area operations. Neither the capabilities of individual European members nor their annual budgets are sufficient to sustain such costly out-of-area operations for a long period of time. The obvious question that then arises is why European governments are persisting with their troop commitments in Afghanistan? The

simple reason is that if Afghanistan is not stabilised militarily and the drug trade not controlled effectively the streets of Europe would not remain secure. Though rhetorical, the statement of former German Defence Minister Peter Struck is still valid: “Germany is even defended at the Hindukush.”

For the new members, it is important to prove to the US that they are equally committed to NATO and a chance to show to the world that they are also important players in the global arena. Though as the present situation shows out-of-area operations mean a severe burden upon smaller members, it remains to be seen whether on its 60th anniversary NATO would attempt to reformulate Article 6 and try and expand the area beyond Europe or North America. While in previous years some analysts were elated about a ‘Global NATO,’ the Afghan experience has taught them the importance of not overstressing the alliance beyond a limit. Moreover, major European members would not allow it to go beyond the prescribed limit. It would not be out of context to mention here the recent Bundestag speech of German Chancellor Angela Merkel where she emphasised that NATO’s new strategic concept must clearly define the borders of the alliance. Stating that she does not see a global NATO, Merkel maintained that the alliance is and will remain primarily concentrated on the collective security of its North Atlantic partners.⁶

The European Pillar

The European pillar or ‘a sharper European profile’ of NATO has come up often in Western security discourse. However, as mentioned earlier, the evolution of the ESDP has always remained a matter of debate and is used as a political tool. While the duplication of efforts and judicious use of resources have been highlighted, the present Atlanticist leadership in France and Germany do not rule out a slow evolution of ESDP, which could be realised in the form of Rapid Reaction Forces and could be deployed in crisis areas – be it in the European neighbourhood or elsewhere. But it is apparent that the EU has severe shortcomings in terms of operability as well as in very complex situations. Yet, there is likely to be significantly strong political will in Europe for building up the continent’s security identity independent of NATO and the US. At the very least, ESDP would be useful as a political tool vis-à-vis the United States.

Though strengthening ESDP is an on-going process, it becomes more pronounced whenever governments change in Paris and Berlin. During the Chirac-Schröder era, the ESDP was projected as a rival to NATO but the change of governments in Berlin and Paris has almost put the issue on the backburner. Nicolas Sarkozy has not only accepted the primacy of NATO in the European security architecture, but has actually joined NATO’s higher military structure in a marked departure from France’s earlier policy of advocating multipolarity and espousing its own ‘exception’. Though France has not renounced its national and/or European military capability, it is interesting to observe that the British Defence Minister has supported the

French proposal for a European military capability.⁷ Such a statement is definitely unexpected coming as it does from Britain, which is considered to be the most US-friendly and Eurosceptic nation. It once again highlights the fact that ESDP may be used more as a political tool by the European leadership.

A debate between the virtues of NATO and ESDP would have continued had the positioning of European forces in Afghanistan not been prolonged and if this exercise had not proved to be an economic burden on Europeans. More so, in the context of NATO enlargement and the shift in the centre of activities from West to East Europe. For instance, the Russian-Georgia War compelled West Europeans to wonder whether the conflict was between the transatlantic and post-Soviet space. It is thus a matter of discomfort for West Europeans that their agenda for EU and NATO is being overshadowed by those of the new members. On the eve of the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit, it is apparent that while France and Germany are determined to see Franco-German unity remain intact and shape the European security architecture, incidents like Georgia and the cyber attacks against Estonian installations in 2007 indicate that new members would definitely attempt to influence the agenda of the European pillar of the NATO in the coming years.⁸

NATO: Viewed from this part of the globe

Viewed from this part of the globe, NATO is seen as a Cold War relic that has lost its relevance. However, NATO expansion, its various initiatives like Partnership for Peace, its penchant for establishing contacts and dialogues with different parts of the world (for example, the Mediterranean and the Gulf) have generated suspicions about its intentions. Another point of view, especially given NATO presence in Afghanistan, is that it can play a stabilising role in the region. While none of Afghanistan's neighbours wish to be involved in the Afghan quagmire, they see benefit in establishing informal co-operation and initiating dialogue with NATO.⁹ For its part, the Alliance's interest in engaging India has been reasonably apparent. NATO Deputy Secretary General Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo's visit to India in April 2007 can be best described as a culminating point of annual discussions since 2001 between Indian policy makers, think tanks and security experts and NATO analysts and its military leadership mainly from Europe. Observers may recall that in 2005 a high-level NATO delegation led by its spokesman, James Appathurai, visited New Delhi and held discussions at various fora. The aim was to dispel suspicion and mistrust about NATO. As a member of the delegation pointed out, "The prospects of globalising NATO brought with it fears of NATO being transformed into a global cop. Such an apprehension was rife among countries like Russia, China and, to an extent, India. This is a misplaced fear as any action by NATO requires the unanimous consent of all 26 members."¹⁰ The NATO Deputy Secretary General's visit to India in 2007 was followed by a meeting at the highest level when Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer met in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2007.

Understandably, given the domestic political compulsions and a long history of non-alignment, India's response to the visits of these annual NATO delegations to India has been minimalist. Apart from occasional references to the Atlantic Alliance in diplomatic parleys and speeches regarding the security situation in Afghanistan, NATO is virtually non-existent in Indian security discourse. Given that under existing regional security circumstances a withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan is not in the offing, India needs to engage the Alliance more in a structured format and notwithstanding divergent view points on and approaches to a range of issues. India should not fail to take into account the evolving dynamics in Afghanistan and the vital role being played by NATO there.

Conclusion

NATO has mainly acted as a defensive organisation during most of its sixty years of existence. However the post-Cold War years have been most eventful for the Alliance. 'Coping with the Allies' (Lindley-French) would remain the most challenging task of the alliance in the coming years. On the eve of the Strasbourg-Kehl summit, it would appear that the summit's outcome would not be something path-breaking because the alliance is indeed facing a challenge in Afghanistan operationally and the issue of coherence organisationally. Moreover, the issue of designating the next Secretary General would be considered a symbolic message to the Muslim world if the alliance ultimately decides in favour of the incumbent Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, against the backdrop of the cartoon controversy. NATO in this part of the world can expect dialogue partners if the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit clearly spells out the frontier of the alliance, defines the scope of its out-of-area operations, changes the semantics and presents a less assertive agenda before the international community.

Notes

¹ Alyson J K Bailes, "The 'New' NATO," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, CXXXVI (503), Jan.-Mar. 2007, pp. 43-55.

² Ivo Daalder & James Goldgeier, "Global NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept.-Oct. 2006, pp. 105-113; Thomas H. Mowle & David H. Sacko, "Global NATO: Bandwagoning in a Unipolar World," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (December 2007), pp.597-618.

³ Speech by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, "Euro-Atlantic Security one Year after 11 September", *IFRI*, Paris, Sept. 2002.

⁴ Julian Lindley-French, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: The Enduring Alliance*, Routledge: London & New York, 2007, p. 9.

⁵ The NATO updated its Article 6 after Algeria got independence with this amendment, "On January 16, 1963, the North Atlantic Council noted that insofar as the former Algerian Departments of France were concerned, the relevant clauses of this Treaty had become inapplicable as from July 3, 1962."

⁶ Federal Chancellor's speech at the German Bundestag, March 26, 2009, Berlin.

⁷ "John Hutton backs European Army," *The Sunday Times*, Oct. 26, 2008.

⁸ For instance, see the interview of Kadri Lilk, the director of the Estonian think tank International Center for Defence Studies in Tallinn in “The Reluctant Globocop: What Is NATO’s Role?” *Spiegel Online*, March 30, 2009.

⁹ For instance, see Arvind Gupta, Should India Engage with NATO?, *IDSA Strategic Comments*, July 08, 2008, Rajesh M. Basur, “NATO in a Changing World: An Indian Perspective,” in V P Malik & Joerg Schulz (eds.), *Emerging NATO: Challenges for Asia and Europe* Observer Research Foundation & Lancer, 2006, p. 186.

¹⁰ Karl-Heinz Kamp, A NATO- India Strategic Dialogue, Article No. 1636, *Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies* (IPCS), February 8, 2005.