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Towards A New NATO Strategic Concept

A View from the United States

WALTER B. SLOCOMBE
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- NATO remains a central element in US foreign and security policy, both as a forum for political consultation and as a military institution.
- If the new Strategic Concept follows the pattern of the experts' report, it will be broadly consistent with US perspectives and desires, specifically in its: reaffirmation of territorial defense as the top NATO priority, to be backed by contingency planning and exercises; emphasis on the importance of NATO addressing new threats, such as terrorism, cyber-attacks, and nuclear proliferation; recognition that distant events can affect NATO allies' security and justify NATO military action; emphasis on a »comprehensive approach« enlisting non-military instruments in support of NATO actions; endorsement of the revised US program for ballistic missile defense in Europe; affirmation of the need for a nuclear element to NATO deterrence as long as nuclear weapons exist, with any changes in US nuclear deployments in Europe to be decided on an Alliance-wide basis; approach to Russia that balances reaching out with attention to the concerns of »new allies«; and call for European military capabilities, especially for expeditionary operations, to be brought more closely in line with NATO policy objectives, and for an end to »precipitous« defense budget declines.
- US reservations about the approach taken in the report are likely to focus on: the absence of a commitment to greater allied force contributions in Afghanistan; lack of specifics on capabilities improvements and internal reforms; equivocation on the goal of a world without nuclear weapons; absence of explicit support for sanctions against Iranian nuclear and missile programs.

Historical Background: The US and NATO

The US is, of course, a founding member of the Alliance, having taken the lead in shaping the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. That treaty represented a historic departure from the traditional US principle of avoiding what Thomas Jefferson denounced as »entangling alliances«. The commitment was not only political, an advance agreement to treat an attack on any NATO member as an attack on the US; it had a practical military dimension – a willingness for the US to maintain substantial forces in Europe and to lead in a multinational military command.

NATO remained at the center of American foreign and security policy throughout the Cold War. The transatlantic relationship was not – despite a good deal of recent misplaced nostalgia – always an easy one. US and European views diverged on relations with the Soviet Union, on Ostpolitik and arms control, on the relative role of nuclear and conventional weapons in alliance strategy, and on »burden sharing«. The allies resisted American proposals to extend NATO's scope beyond geographically defined defense of alliance territory, and complained of American domination of NATO decision-making and lack of consultation on matters, such as arms control, where essentially unilateral US actions affected their interests.

For all these differences – which still persist in new guises – the Alliance retained broad support in the US. That continues to be the case, with opinion polls consistently showing more support for US security relationships with NATO and its members than with other partners.

With the implosion of the Soviet Union ending its domination of Central Europe and the direct military threat to the European allies the question naturally arose for the US – as for other allies – whether NATO still had a purpose. Some in the US argued that with the Soviet threat gone and Europe increasingly focused on internal integration, the right course for America was to resume its historical distance from Europe's problems. This view was held not only by those who favored a return to a form of isolationism, but also by the proponents of a highly interventionist US approach to international security, who saw the chief, if not the only, challenges to American interests arising in the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, Asia, rather than

Europe and wished to be free of European constraints on US action.

The early 1990s represented the high-water mark, at least in the US, of the view that NATO's time had passed: the US and many European nations hoped that the conflict in the Balkans could best be handled by the Europeans and NATO as an institution stood aside from the US-led international coalition that reversed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. In the event, however, the dominant view in the US came to be that NATO could and should be a keystone of US security policy both for Europe (exemplified by its central role in implementing the settlement in Bosnia and defeating Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo), and as a means to address challenges arising outside NATO's established geographic radius.

Accordingly, the US, far from pulling back from NATO, has continued to regard NATO as a central element of its international security policy. It has been a strong advocate of relatively rapid membership for former Warsaw Pact countries, of a direct military role for NATO in »out of area« operations (like those in Afghanistan), of non-member European states (and indeed of »values partners« like Australia) joining in NATO operations and activities through the Partnership for Peace, and of expanding NATO's missions to include new threats like terrorism, cyberwar, energy security, and nuclear proliferation.

US reliance on NATO has certainly not been undeviating. Most egregiously, the US declined to make its initial military response in Afghanistan a NATO project despite the allies' immediate invocation of the Article V guarantee following the September 11 attacks – but still sought later to make success in Afghanistan a touchstone of NATO's viability.

Nor has it been wholly successful. »Out of area« interventions remain controversial. NATO took no part in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and only the most minimal role in the subsequent stabilization efforts. US hopes that a growing European Union security structure would be closely integrated with NATO – complementary rather than competitive – have only partially been fulfilled. European defense budgets have continued to decline, and the gaps between US and European military capabilities have grown.

The US View of the Purpose of a New Strategic Concept

Nonetheless, NATO remains for the US, as stated in the new national security strategy, »the pre-eminent security alliance in the world today«, both the »cornerstone for US engagement with the world and a catalyst for international action«. Most of the US's other formal alliance relationships and all its less formal security partnerships are essentially one-way streets where the US commits itself to help partners in their own defense but without expecting much, if any, help from them outside the strict confines of the joint defense of the partner in question. NATO is – with the partial exception of Australia and to a much lesser extent Japan – the only case where the US can realistically regard its partner as a potential source of assistance outside the context of the US guarantee. This broader relationship is not, however, without its problems simply because the US expects more of its NATO partners – so it more likely that the partners will seem to fall short of what the US expects, and that the allies will believe the US is pressuring them to act more in its interests than their own.

So agreement within the Alliance on basic principles – a »strategic concept« without the capital letters – is, in principle, desirable for all concerned. The 1999 NATO Strategic Concept represented, by American lights, a considerable step toward adapting NATO to the new security conditions. In particular, it resolved the old »out of area« impasse, making clear that NATO's strategic concerns and its potential military missions extended beyond territorial defense.

However, changing world conditions – particularly the emergence of terrorism and proliferation as central security concerns – and continued controversy over NATO's twenty-first-century roles and missions made the US an eager advocate of a new Strategic Concept. Although the project started before the 2008 elections, the new US administration, with its general policy of favoring multilateral institutions, has embraced the new Strategic Concept as »an opportunity to revitalize and reform the Alliance«.

For the US, the fundamental goal in the new Strategic Concept is to ensure that NATO defines itself, the threats it faces, and the appropriate responses in ways that are congruent with US definitions and policies – and that it re-affirms NATO's character as a military

alliance in the face of what many American defense experts see as a growing »Euro-pacifism«.

The recently released report of the NATO group of experts chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright foreshadows what the final document may contain. Broadly speaking, the report is consistent with US goals.

US Perspectives on the Threats and Challenges and on NATO's Core Tasks and Functions

Threats: A close match with US views

The report identifies »new perils« facing the alliance in terms closely matching US views – including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, »instability along Europe's periphery«, failed states, vulnerability of information systems, piracy, and risks to energy supply. The report also points to challenges not traditionally thought of as »security« matters, notably environmental degradation, »demographic changes«, and the financial crisis. It names as the »most probable« specific threats ballistic missile attack, terrorist strikes, and cyber-assaults, all US priority challenges. It also identifies the »common values« of its members as a key NATO strength – a concept crucial to the US view that NATO has a legitimate interest in matters beyond territorial defense and traditional military threats.

Missions: Top billing for territorial defense

In listing NATO's missions, the report places first priority on »reaffirming NATO's core commitment [to] Collective Defense«. Significantly, it calls specifically for »contingency planning«, »focused exercises«, and readiness and logistics measures to implement this goal and give the NATO Response Force an explicit Article V role. This approach meets important US concerns, not so much because the US believes there is any immediate military threat to NATO territory, but because it recognizes the need to reassure new members, notably Poland and the Baltic states, that attention to new perils does not mean ignoring their fears about Russia. It will be important to the US that the specifics on planning and exercises survive into the final document, even though they can be expected to provoke Moscow.

Unconventional threats a high priority

The report's line on »unconventional threats« concurs with US perspectives, declaring that »events in one part of the world are far more likely than in the past to have repercussions elsewhere« – the basic US argument for a NATO without geographical constraints. The report also affirms the possibility of NATO action even where there is no direct security issue, such as humanitarian intervention or response to natural disasters.

In addressing operations outside alliance borders, however, the report is relatively nuanced: It calls for »enhancing« NATO's capacity »in military operations and broader security missions beyond its borders« but also cautions that NATO »is a regional, not a global organization«, listing the security of the Euro-Atlantic region as NATO's second »core task« after territorial defense. It calls for – but does not specify – »guidelines« on when NATO should undertake such efforts. This qualified position probably satisfies the preferences of the current US administration, but deliberately eschews the prior US administration's advocacy of an explicitly »global« NATO.

Caution on Afghanistan

Despite divisions over the war in Afghanistan, the report goes a long way toward reflecting US perspectives, committing NATO to an Afghan state that is »stable« and offers no base for terrorism. However, it is circumspect in its specifics. It does not call for increased combat and trainer/advisor contributions from European members; the operation is tactfully described as »a rich source of lessons«, and success in Afghanistan is not listed as a »core task«, much less a critical test of NATO's credibility. This omission will draw attention in some US circles.

The »comprehensive approach« principle

In stressing the need for NATO to act in partnership with other international organizations, non-member states, and NGOs and to follow a »comprehensive approach« enlisting the full range of non-military instruments, the report echoes the Obama administration's »whole of government« slogan emphasizing that more than military instruments are necessary for meeting most current security challenges. But the report also makes clear that, for the most part, it is not NATO's function to provide those non-military instruments, but

instead to work with those organizations, nations, and entities that can. Washington will likely be highly supportive of NATO focusing planning on integrated political-military missions, to include identification of a cadre of civilian specialists available to assist in NATO operations.

Russia

The report's discussion of the fraught issue of Russia and our shared neighbors explicitly reflects the spectrum of views of Russia within the alliance – where the US occupies an intermediate position: less fearful than some, more skeptical than others. Its recommendations represent an attempt to balance reaching out to Russia and attempting to convince it of NATO's good will, »while reassuring all Allies that their security and interests will be defended«. On this general principle – as on the more specific proposition that the door is open to new members (but without making any specific commitment to Georgia or Ukraine and cautioning that membership is »not an entitlement but a responsibility«) – the report is consistent with current US positions.

Capabilities and reform

The report echoes long-standing US proposals – and a host of prior NATO declarations – by calling for military capabilities, specifically those for »demanding missions at strategic distance«, to be better matched to commitments. The US will welcome the stated capability priorities, including »expeditionary missions«, C4ISR, special operations, strategic lift, and enhanced deployability and sustainability. The report also recites a familiar list of internal reforms – more common funding; pooling of lift, logistics, procurement, and communications; rationalized infrastructure; and a streamlined command structure.

The report is candid in acknowledging that similar pledges have not been fulfilled in the past and in demanding an end to the »precipitous decline« in most members' defense budgets. It calls for agreement on capabilities and reforms, but does not set any particular targets for military spending beyond the implicit benchmark suggested by noting that only 6 of the 26 European members spend more than 2 percent of GDP on defense, with similar shortfalls on the goal of 20 percent of budgets for investment and on priority for deployability and sustainability. The US administration may be content to avoid replaying past budget target

games, but the lack of a stronger commitment to more allied defense spending will draw criticism in Congress, always a source of calls for more »burden sharing«.

Nuclear policy

The report is fully consistent with the US administration's position in its recently published Nuclear Policy Review (NPR) that as long as nuclear weapons exist NATO will need a nuclear deterrent of minimum but sufficient size, with »shared responsibility for deployment and operational support«. The report – like the NPR – endorses retention of some forward-deployed US nuclear weapons, while avoiding any position on the long-term maintenance of what is described as »the geographical distribution of NATO nuclear deployments in Europe«, saying only that any decisions on the matter should be made by the »Alliance as a whole«.

The report is essentially silent on the place of nuclear weapons in NATO military doctrine, other than noting their reduced role and calling for »in-depth consultations on the issue«. This silence reflects divisions in the Alliance over the nature of the US nuclear guarantee, the credibility of a threat to use nuclear weapons in response to conventional – or chemical or biological – attack, and the desirability of some form of »no first use« pledge. Given the extreme unlikelihood that NATO will face a situation in which use of nuclear weapons is at all plausible, there may be a consensus against addressing these issues, which are of modest practical but great theoretical import. If, however, they come up in the drafting process, the US can be expected to seek to repeat the NPR formula declaring that the »fundamental« purpose of nuclear weapons is deterrence of nuclear attack, while avoiding a flat »no first use« policy.

Arms control

The report, presumably reflecting French views, stops short of a clear endorsement of President Obama's long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons, describing the goal in more limited terms as a world »free from the threat« of such arms rather than their literal non-existence. In other respects, however, the report's treatment of arms control closely matches the US administration's – against proliferation, for greater security and safety, toward reduced »prominence« of nuclear weapons in doctrine, and toward adoption of a policy renouncing nuclear attack on states that are fully compliant with non-proliferation obligations. Curiously,

there is no explicit endorsement of the New START agreement with Russia, possibly because it was signed so close to the release of the report, nor is there mention of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT), of a follow-on arms control agenda, nor of sanctions on Iran or North Korea (although it points to Iranian missile and nuclear programs as a potential Article V threat). The US will likely seek endorsement of its positions on these issues in the actual Strategic Concept document.

Missile defense

The report is notably direct, by contrast, in its endorsement of the restructured US missile defense plan to protect Europe against Iranian attack as »more effective, rapid, and reliable« than the prior »third site« plan and putting missile defense »fully within a NATO context«, and in declaring that missile defense is an »essential mission« of NATO.

NATO's partnerships


The report makes NATO's »partnerships« a central theme of its prescription for the Strategic Concept. The US will find little to quarrel with in its call for better coordination with the EU, a more effective UN, and continued cooperation with the OSCE, and its endorsement of work with »operational partners« including Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand – but outside any »formal structure«.

The Middle East

There is probably no international security issue on which Europe and the US are more divided than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a difference that continues even with the Obama administration's less uncritical stance toward Israel. The report sidesteps this divide, simply endorsing a »just and lasting peace settlement« and offering to assist in implementing such a settlement if asked by the parties and the UN. The US will not want to see the final document venture further into this morass.

NATO's role as policy forum

The report identifies providing a venue for transatlantic consultation and crisis management as a core task of NATO. As a well-established institution for consultation ranging from the long-term strategic to the immediate



tactical NATO is, if properly employed, highly valuable to the US, affording in the transatlantic context a forum that does not exist in other regions.

The US expects to turn to NATO in crises, so it will be receptive to the report's cautious call for a re-examination of the rule that the Alliance can act only by consensus. However, given the inevitable suspicion that the US would seek to use any departure from consensus decision-making to dominate the Alliance, it seems unlikely this proposal will find great resonance, nor be pushed strongly by the US.



About the author:

Walter B. Slocombe served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy under President Clinton from September 1994 to January 2001. He has been the Senior Advisor and Director for Security Affairs (National Security and Defense) in the Coalition Provisional Authority for Iraq. In July 2004, President Bush appointed him to the »Silberman-Robb« Commission on United States Intelligence Capabilities Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction. Slocombe has also served as Principal Deputy Under Secretary. He received his undergraduate education at Princeton University, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University where he did graduate research on Soviet politics, and is a graduate of Harvard Law School.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
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Responsible:
Dr. Gero Maaß, Head,
International Policy Analysis

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7745 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9248
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