

## Nato In Its Evolving Role

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### Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949 to deter the communist threat during the Cold War era. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO's primary goal was to contain the threat that was thought to originate from behind the eastern borders. NATO's primary function was collective defence, as envisaged by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. However, the alliance was militarily dominated by the United States. From its very beginning, NATO was not simply about defending the Allies against the Soviet threat but the alliance also became the institutionalization of the relationship between North America and Western Europe. In the words of NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, the role of NATO during the Cold War was to keep 'the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War years, NATO played a decisive and unrivalled role in Western Europe's security architecture. The collapse of Communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the period from 1989 to 1991 called into question NATO's future role and even its continued existence.

The end of the Cold War proved to be a double-edged sword for NATO; Although it had clearly won by outliving the Warsaw Pact, however, simultaneous disappearance of its *raison d'être* called into question its future relevance in the post –Cold War world. The end of the cold war started a new era during which NATO experienced a process of adaptation. Yet when the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO did not become a relic of the past. Instead, the instability generated in central and Eastern Europe by the Soviet collapse reminded European allies of the importance of maintaining the transatlantic alliance as a hedge against an uncertain future. The United States, for its part, had no desire to abandon the primary instrument through which it exercised influence in Europe, which remained vital to its long-term security interests.<sup>2</sup> NATO spent the first decade of the post-Cold War era deeply engaged in addressing the destabilizing consequences of the Soviet collapse. The alliance used the lure of NATO membership to motivate newly freed but highly insecure former Communist nations to institute wide ranging democratic and economic reforms.

### NATO's New Role

Meanwhile, with the United States as the driving force, NATO became directly involved in ending the Yugoslav civil war, undertaking offensive military operations for the first time in its history to bring the war in Bosnia to an end and, several years later, to end the Serbian ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo.<sup>3</sup> These military actions were followed by the first ever NATO peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and then in Kosovo. NATO enlargement by the year 2002 and its actions in the Balkans were tremendous successes. However, the bone of contention was the internal bickering over the management of the Serbian bombing campaign in 1999, which raised concerns in Washington about whether NATO was an effective vehicle for conducting offensive

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military operations. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most European allies had significantly reduced their defence spending to the point where the United States was the only ally capable of engaging in full spectrum high intensity military operations. This became evident during the Serbian bombing campaign when the above mentioned disparity became obvious. This led to talk of NATO becoming a two tiered military alliance, in which the United States would engage in serious war fighting and the Europeans would handle the subsequent peacekeeping.

However, as mentioned above, the dissolution of the Soviet Union saw NATO transform and take on a new role, specifically after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In August 2003, NATO took command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul and by taking action not only out-of-area, but out of continent, the Alliance clearly demonstrated that it was prepared to adopt a functional, rather than a geographical, approach to security. Apart from this, NATO provided humanitarian relief to Pakistan after the October 2005 earthquake.<sup>4</sup> The new role saw NATO going global and expanding its mission beyond Europe. In recent years NATO has begun to move away from its original focus on Europe and recognize that the threats facing the alliance are more diverse and geographically distant than the threats during the Cold War. This change also led to the "out of area" debate which raged within the alliance as NATO was initially meant to serve the security needs of the Europe and the United States. This change involving NATO's operations outside Europe is also seen by many as an effort to "globalize" the alliance. This is because most threats to Western Security emanate from beyond Europe's borders.

Against the backdrop of history, the evolution of NATO has proceeded in three distinct phases; the Cold War, the decade that preceded the Cold War and the period that began with the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Each period posed distinct security challenges and each required a different set of responses and therefore, each produced changes in NATO. Given the evolving role of NATO since the end of the Cold War, a few issues need to be looked into, specifically the present role of the alliance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are questions whether NATO is being used as a foreign policy arsenal against a resurgent Russia? Russian opposition to NATO enlargement and the possible consequences of NATO's push eastwards are also issues that warrant attention. It may be noted that NATO enlargement is taking place in the backdrop of a confident, wealthy and resurgent Russia. Russian opposition to NATO expansion has triggered a considerable debate about whether American efforts for NATO expansion and Russian opposition could possibly lead to a neo Cold War. This raises the question, whether NATO is subordinate to U.S. strategy or supplemental to the distinct national interests of individual members. In view of all this, the quest for energy security of NATO members cannot be ignored and the fact that NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine holds benefits for NATO members. Furthermore, it may be seen that another important issue surrounding the debate about NATO's evolving role is that the United States continues to play a significant role in European security affairs and the vehicle for that role is NATO.

NATO enlargement as a whole is viewed very uneasily by Russia and the fact that NATO gained a new role through Post –Cold War enlargement, which was intended to stabilize Europe. However, enlargement has the potential to create new dividing lines in Europe as is evident from Russian opposition to NATO expansion and also NATO's

response to the Russian invasion of Georgia. The dynamics of NATO- Russia relations are complicated by the legacy of the Cold war. Although NATO denies that its present purpose is to defend against Russia, however, the distrust and hostility regarding NATO remains within the Russian military. For the first time in the history of NATO, Article 5 was invoked in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and allies came forward with offers of military support for the military operation in Afghanistan. However, the United States found that European allies had little to offer in the face of American expectations. The European offers for help did not come up to American expectations and rejection of most of the offers raised concerns amongst Europeans about the relevance of a military alliance where only one member could project significant military power.<sup>5</sup> Divisions within NATO emerged after 9/11 as only the United States and Britain were ready to react in a forceful way, whereas the others felt they would only like to be involved in the peacekeeping operations. The September 11 attacks were an important event in this regard, demonstrating that the most serious security threats to NATO members, emanated from outside of Europe.

Consequently, the Americans persuaded the Europeans to act on two things: The first was to convince European allies to pool their resources to establish a single, multinational, European-cantered NATO Response Force (NRF), which would be deployed alongside U.S. forces. The second was to persuade the allies that NATO needed to extend its mandate beyond the traditional borders to Europe so that NATO forces could go out of area to where the threats actually were.<sup>6</sup> These two demands were agreed upon without any hurdle. NATO also agreed to assume command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan, the first out of area operation in the history of the alliance.<sup>7</sup> Due to persistent U.S. pressure, the allies have agreed, over a period of time to the expansion of the ISAF peacekeeping forces. Riskier operations and continuous U.S. demands are a source of friction between the allies.

Similarly, competing U.S.-French ambitions also fuel frictions between the two countries. This is inevitable because of the long-standing interest of the United States to maintain strong U.S. influence in Europe through NATO. This interest clashes has caused friction as France is determined to minimize U.S. influence without actually breaking the transatlantic link. However, it may be noted that France did not approve the NATO takeover of ISAF and the U.S. efforts to strengthen NATO have been viewed by France rather uncomfortably.<sup>8</sup> France is prepared to use NATO in what it regards as appropriate circumstances and also it does not want NATO to interfere in what it believes to be the province of the EU. Most EU member NATO allies seek a middle road and favour a strong and independent European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and are committed to work for this but are not willing to cross U.S. redlines. However, they are unwilling to go as far as the French in pushing ESDP's independence from NATO. At the same time they are disinclined to go as far as the United States would like, to discover new roles for NATO.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these differences, the United States has continued to press an ever more ambitious agenda on NATO and especially in Afghanistan, where the U.S. has been steadily pressurizing allies to broaden the scope of risk they are willing to shoulder. At the same time, the United States is keen on proposing and working for the expansion of NATO contacts with non European Western allies, which would give the alliance a more

global focus. Furthermore, the United States is also pressing NATO to take on a more substantial role in the Middle East and Africa, which, taken together means that these initiatives map out an ambitious vision of an increasingly globally focused alliance taking on a wider range of issues and missions with the United States firmly in the lead.

Another significant development, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is that NATO's goal in Europe has changed from defending its eastern borders to pushing those boundaries as far east as possible. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the alliance executed the biggest expansion in its history, to include seven new members, comprising of states which were previously Soviet satellites and part of the Warsaw pact.<sup>10</sup> However, the agenda for expansion does not stop at any point and more states are likely to become members under the Membership Action Plan (MAP). This is viewed as a concerted effort by NATO to consolidate its role in the Balkan region and also a potential eastward push into Ukraine and Georgia and has raised many eyebrows in Russia.

As mentioned above, NATO expansion is viewed by Russia with great scepticism and it is widely believed that there is more to NATO expansion than the official explanation. The official line from NATO is that membership in the alliance brings with it stability, security and can help stabilize the region as well as encourage states to improve democratic governance. Keeping in view Russian opposition to NATO expansion, it is believed that, for the U.S., NATO is just a vehicle and another opportunity to extend its hard power globally in the face of a resurgent Russia. The appearance of a powerful military bloc on Russian borders is being taken by Russians as a direct threat to their security. Russian reaction to NATO expansion is evident from the issuance of warnings to retaliate and also the Cold War era rhetoric which has once again surfaced in the aftermath of NATO enlargement. This could possibly lead to a new "Cold War" between the United States and Russia.

### **NATO's Push Eastwards**

Russia has reacted to the growing possibility of NATO expanding into Ukraine and Georgia. This westward NATO expansion is considered a hostile move and an attempt to encircle Russia. It is seen as an attempt to maintain military presence in the region, considered by Russia as its backyard. Russia's uneasiness is due to the fact that NATO enlargement aligns the post Soviet states with the Euro-Atlantic community and brings with it greater Western influence. It also reduces Russia's geopolitical sway and is a hedge against the return of Russian ambition.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's attitude towards NATO enlargement is conditioned by certain perceptions. Two factors seem essential in this respect. First, the alliance is still very often perceived as a challenge to Russia's security interests, even if only a potential one. Secondly, Moscow wants to prevent the central security role in Europe being played by a structure to which Russia does not and will not have direct access.

Russia's growing concerns are also due to the fact that even if NATO's expansion plans are not designed to curtail Russian ambitions and influence, the geographical significance of the countries hoping for membership hold out other benefits for NATO's members. NATO's increased emphasis on energy security for its member countries is

also viewed by some critics as a factor in its eastward expansion. Should Georgia and Ukraine become members of NATO, the alliance would then be in a very strong position to exert influence over and protect oil supplies from the Caspian Sea through Georgia and offer support to Ukraine in any future disputes with Russia over gas.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, as the alliance, backed by the United States struggles to increase membership and broaden its scope, the rifts within the alliance also become evident. European leaders are reluctant to alienate an increasingly assertive Russia by denying membership status to Georgia and Ukraine, at least for the time being.

The United States, along with the rest of the world, knows that pulling Ukraine and Georgia away from Russia is one of the surest ways to contain Russia's influence and keep Moscow from reaching westward. While the United States pushes for membership for Ukraine and Georgia, Russia has been making attempts to do the opposite. This is evident from the fact that Russia helped fracture the Ukrainian government and also invaded Georgia, thus making it clear that it considers both countries its turf and that the West should keep its distance. The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 also opened a serious rift between the alliance and Moscow, thus making relations more strained between the two.<sup>13</sup> NATO responded by freezing all ties with Russia. However, NATO's reliance on Russia for supplying troops to Afghanistan prevented the alliance in pushing Russia too hard and thus, provoking a very harsh response.

The United States, the United Kingdom and also central Europe believe that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia would end Russia's resurgence before it can make any new moves. Similarly, Tbilisi and Kiev, specifically the pro-Western Parts of Kiev view that if the West does not formally pull them in now, Russia will reinstate its claim on each territory.<sup>14</sup> However, Western Europe's view on the membership of Ukraine and Georgia diverges from that of the United States. Although containing Russia makes sense but both Ukraine and Georgia would have to make a large number of reforms; political, economic, military and institutional- before they could become productive NATO members.<sup>15</sup> France and Germany are of the view that these former Soviet states should delay joining NATO until they can prove they are stable and capable of contributing to NATO's security missions. They feel that it would be a net loss for the alliance if these members are incapable to deliver and are a burden for the alliance, instead of becoming burden sharing members.

Such differences among members are to the advantage of Russia which is bent upon preventing further expansion and has actively campaigned Germany and France to prevent the alliance from extending the membership. Russia has reminded certain NATO members that it can make life difficult for them if they go against its wishes. Therefore, Germany and France have opposed the extension of membership to Ukraine and Georgia. Germany receives most of its energy supplies from Russia, something Moscow could cut off at will. As far as France is concerned, it acted as a peacemaker between Russia and Georgia during their war in August 2008 and as a result would not like to provoke Russia.<sup>16</sup> These cracks within NATO give Russia a window of opportunity and slow down the process of expansion. The fact that NATO serves vital U.S. interests cannot be denied and is evident from its keenness to pursue NATO expansion despite mixed responses from Germany and France. For the United States, the alliance is a useful forum for trans-Atlantic dialogue and serves as a vital institution for organizing multinational military missions outside Europe.

The rationale for eastward expansion deep into post Soviet territories in the Eurasian region is energy and trade centred. A "new Great Game" is being enacted in the region in which Czarist Russia and Imperial Britain have been replaced by the United States on one hand, and on the other by Russia and China. This could lead to a neo-Cold War in the region. The major U.S. objectives in Central Asia and the surrounding region relate to "securing access to energy resources".<sup>17</sup> In this context, NATO has a new "expanded role in energy security" and it is for this reason that it is forging partnerships with the energy rich states in Central Asia and Caucuses.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Russia's drive in the region aims at enforcing its role as the source and conduit of energy supply to Europe. Apart from this, military preponderance, the restoration of Moscow's influence and economic independence are significant for Russia as it does not want to experience any kind of exclusion.

Apart from Russia, other countries also view the growing military influence of NATO rather uncomfortably. No government in the region around Afghanistan supports long-term U.S. or NATO presence there. Countries including Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia have reservations about a NATO base within their spheres of influence and believe that they must balance the threats from al Qaeda and the Taliban against those posed by the United States and NATO.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has announced a "large scale" rearmament and renewal of Russia's nuclear arsenal, accusing NATO of pushing ahead with expansion near Russian borders. Other than the proposed NATO expansion, the under consideration missile defence facilities in Eastern Europe by the United States are also viewed with scepticism by Moscow.

## Conclusion

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has undergone a profound change in the post Cold War era and as mentioned above, the most profound changes have included; NATO expansion, an extension of its geographic reach, peacekeeping and relief operations. NATO's expanded ambit is also a result of new global politics that emerged after the Cold War and the global threat of terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. Despite its long list of achievements, NATO continues to experience strategic drift, with deep divisions inside the alliance on future roles and missions. NATO's current mission in Afghanistan is an example as such, as the alliance suffers from a lack of both resources and political will and divisions within member states add to the existing troubles.<sup>20</sup>

Among other things, the allies have never truly agreed upon the nature of the mission and the United States has been instrumental in pushing the agenda which it deems fit. As the alliance celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the mounting signs of trouble within the alliance need to be looked into. Although NATO has added numerous new members during the past decade, most of them possess minuscule military capabilities and are weak, therefore a burden for the alliance. Similarly, there are growing fissures in the alliance about how to deal with Russia. The West European powers like Germany and France tend to favour a cautious, conciliatory policy unlike the Central and East European countries along with the United States, which advocate a hard-line approach. As a result, the United States is caught in the middle of intra-alliance squabbles. Similarly, NATO's stumbling performance in Afghanistan is also a cause for concern.

The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit of NATO also marked France's reintegration into NATO's military structure, which is a welcome sign for the alliance as France has a large army and is a producer of military hardware. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit agenda included choosing a new leader and discussing the alliance's commitment in Afghanistan. European nations refused to increase combat troops and instead, agreed to send soldiers to aid with security during the upcoming elections in the country and also help with the training mission. The alliance's future orientation was a major theme at the summit, and a declaration was launched for developing a new Strategic Concept. It may be too early to predict the future of the alliance, but much depends on the successes or failures in Afghanistan and also on the United States active involvement. As long as the U.S. is the driving force behind NATO, it will continue to exist but may encounter problems due to the capabilities shortfall of the European allies. Most importantly, many questions remain unanswered and these inconclusive debates include Russia's new hostile stance, which could be a blessing as the alliance could use Russia's resurgence to redefine itself. Issues such as American unilateralism, capabilities of members and a possible overstretch still overshadow the alliance. Subsequent events will reveal NATO's fate as despite its many achievements the alliance faces innumerable challenges, the toughest being Afghanistan. Only time will tell, if the rationale for NATO's future existence will be a resurgent Russia or a nuclear armed Iran.

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