

## **NATO at a crossroads**

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### **Introduction**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949 to deter the Communist threat to the West 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 across the Western bloc's eastern borders. NATO's primary function was collective defence as envisaged by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Alliance was traditionally meant to safeguard the freedom of its members in the North Atlantic area. Originally consisting of twelve countries, the Organization expanded gradually to include Greece, Turkey and West Germany. 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. NATO 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.

However, the end of the Cold War was a double-edged sword for NATO. The Alliance had clearly won by outliving the Warsaw Pact; but, at the same time, the disappearance of its *raison d'être* called into question its relevance in the post-Cold War world. Then started a new era during which NATO experienced a process of adaptation. Yet, when the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO did not become a part of the ash heap of history. 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.

Meanwhile, with the United States as the driving force, NATO became directly involved in ending the Yugoslav civil war; undertaking offensive

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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 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. That became evident during the Serbian bombing campaign when the disparity became obvious. That led to talk of NATO's 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.<sup>4</sup>

However, as mentioned above, the dissolution of the Soviet Union saw NATO transform itself 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 the continent, the Alliance clearly demonstrated that it was prepared to adopt a functional, rather than geographical, approach to security. Apart from that, NATO provided humanitarian relief to Pakistan after the October 2005 earthquake.<sup>5</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 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. That is because most threats to Western security emanate from beyond Europe's borders.<sup>6</sup>

Given the evolving role of NATO since the end of the Cold War, some questions need to be answered. This paper shall make an attempt to examine NATO's evolving role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Against the backdrop of history, the evolution of NATO has preceded 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, led to changes in NATO.

The basic question is whether NATO is being used as a foreign policy instrument against a resurgent Russia. Russian opposition to NATO's enlargement and the possible consequences of its push eastwards are also issues that warrant attention. It may be noted that NATO's enlargement is taking place

in the backdrop of a confident, wealthy and resurgent Russia. Russian opposition to NATO's expansion has triggered a considerable debate about whether American efforts for NATO's expansion and Russian opposition could possibly lead to a renewed Cold War. That 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 that, the quest for energy security of NATO members cannot be ignored, as also the fact that NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine holds benefits for NATO members. Furthermore, it is 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. Therefore, many see NATO as an instrument of the American foreign policy establishment.

NATO's 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's 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, the distrust and hostility regarding NATO remains within the Russian military.

### **NATO's new role: a grab for power or stability?**

Throughout the 1990's, NATO also began to show its transatlantic political fault lines. The disappearance of the Soviet threat gave European allies greater political space to accelerate European integration in pursuit of an "ever closer" EU. Although EU was mostly concerned with building closer political and economic ties among its member states, at the end of the Cold War the EU began to turn its gaze outward. With France as the dominant state, the EU began to develop a security and defence personality of its own.<sup>7</sup> As the United States was the traditional leader of NATO and remains so even today, it was conflicted by these developments within the EU. The establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by the EU and also the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) as the defence arm of the CFSP was eventually accepted by the United States because the EU member NATO allies strongly wanted it and it was believed that the ESDP could induce European allies to assume a greater share of the defence burden within the Alliance.<sup>8</sup> While the Europeans were and still are working to establish an independent ESDP within the EU, in order to enhance their security policies, the United States has been tugging in the opposite direction. At the same time the U.S. was seeking new roles and missions for the Alliance as the NATO enlargement process and NATO's engagement in the Balkans began to wind down. 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 support for the military operation in Afghanistan. However, the United States found that the European allies had little to offer in terms 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>10</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 thought they would only like to be involved in peacekeeping operations.

Consequently, the Americans persuaded the Europeans to act on two things. The first was for them to pool their resources to establish a single, multinational, Europe-centred NATO Response Force (NRF) which would be deployed alongside U.S. forces. The second was that NATO needed to extend its mandate beyond the traditional borders so that its forces could go out of area to where the threats actually were.<sup>11</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>12</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, nevertheless, a source of friction between the allies.

Similarly, competing U.S.-French ambitions also fuel frictions between the two countries. That is inevitable because of the long-standing struggle between the United States, keen as always to maintain strong U.S. influence in Europe through NATO, and France, on the other hand, determined to minimize that 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>13</sup> France is prepared to use NATO in what it regards as appropriate circumstances and also it does not want NATO interference 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 ESDP and are committed to work for this but are not willing to cross U.S. redlines which is a reflection of a commitment to maintain close ties with the United States. 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>14</sup>

Despite these differences, the United States has continued to press an ever more ambitious agenda on NATO, especially in Afghanistan where the U.S. has been steadily pressurizing allies to broaden the scope of risk they are willing to take. 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. 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.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, other than NATO's new roles outlined above and its peacekeeping operations in the Balkans; since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, 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 states which were previously Soviet satellites and part of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>16</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). That 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 which raises many eyebrows in Russia. As mentioned above, NATO's expansion is viewed by Russia with great scepticism and it is widely believed that there is more to it 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.<sup>17</sup> Keeping in view Russian opposition to NATO's expansion, it is believed that, for the U.S., NATO is just a vehicle and another opportunity to extend its hard power globally as against 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. The Russian reaction to NATO's expansion is evident from its issuance of warnings to retaliate and also in its Cold War era rhetoric which has once again surfaced.<sup>18</sup> That could possibly lead to a new "Cold War" between the United States and Russia.

### **Push eastwards**

Russia has reacted to the growing possibility of NATO expanding into Ukraine and Georgia considering it as a hostile move by the West to encircle Russia and maintain military presence in the region considered by Russia as its backyard. Russia's uneasiness is because NATO's enlargement aligns the post-Soviet states with the Euro-Atlantic community and brings with it greater Western influence. That also reduces Russia's geopolitical sway and is a hedge against the realization of Russian ambitions.<sup>19</sup> Russia's attitude towards NATO enlargement, be it the previous or the next one, is only part of Russia's attitude towards, and its perception of, NATO as such. 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 existing 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>20</sup> Interestingly, as the Alliance, backed by the United States, struggles to increase membership and broaden its scope, the rifts within NATO 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, making relations more strained between the two.<sup>21</sup> NATO responded by freezing all ties with Russia. However, NATO's reliance on Russia for supplying provisions for troops in Afghanistan prevented the Alliance from pushing Russia too hard and thus provoke a very harsh response.

Regardless of what NATO's reaction was to the Russian invasion of Georgia, the Alliance's core mission, collective defence, became another casualty of the conflict. Although Georgia was not a member of NATO and did not require NATO to invoke Article 5, many countries in Central and Eastern Europe claimed that the West's response to the conflict was lukewarm.<sup>22</sup> However, shortly after the conflict, Poland decided to abandon any objections it may have had to U.S. plans to install ballistic missile interceptors on its territory and signed on to the missile shield agreement, a move that greatly angered Russia.<sup>23</sup> The Russia-Georgia conflict also generated a heated debate inside NATO Headquarters about the future of NATO enlargement. At this point, both proponents and opponents of MAP believed that the Russia-Georgia conflict vindicated their original position. Those countries that supported MAP for Georgia and Ukraine maintained that, had that process been set in motion, the war between Russia and Georgia would not have happened. On the other hand, the countries that opposed MAP, most notably, France and Germany, claimed that had NATO offered MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, the Alliance could have been faced with the disastrous choice of going to war with Russia or imploding in view of a Russian aggressor. This shows that enlargement will not be NATO's

only challenge in redefining and rebuilding its relationship with Russia. Also, NATO will have to reassure some of its newer members that its commitment to Article 5 remains sound and to aspiring members that their NATO aspirations will continue to be taken seriously.<sup>24</sup>

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-West parts of Kiev, view that if the West does not formally pull them in now, Russia will reinstate its claim on each territory.<sup>25</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>26</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 its 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 was the broker of peace between Russia and Georgia during their war in August 2008 and as a result would not like to provoke Russia.<sup>27</sup> These cracks within NATO give Russia a window of opportunity to 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 making. The major U.S. objectives in Central Asia and the surrounding region relate to "securing access to energy resources".<sup>28</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 the Caucuses.<sup>29</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.

The United States has maintained close ties with Georgia and with pro-West politicians in Ukraine and does not give concessions to a newly aggressive Russia. Rather, it wants NATO to send a clear message that Moscow cannot intimidate the Alliance. On the other hand, France has also militarily reintegrated into NATO at the organization's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. However, apart from France, as mentioned previously, Germany wants to send an accommodating message to Moscow, both by slowing down NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine and by welcoming a call by President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia for talks on a new "security architecture" for Europe. Therefore, Germany and France are of the view that a membership action plan for Ukraine would outrage Russia, which considers Ukraine a crucial part of its physical landscape, and a plan for Georgia could destabilize the Caucasus.<sup>30</sup>

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>31</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.

Furthermore, Russian rhetoric about the threat posed by NATO expansion is also viewed by some defence experts as contradictory, due to a number of reasons. Moscow-based defence expert Alexander Golts claims that Russian President Medvedev's demonising of NATO is at odds with Russia's stated goal of a slimmed-down military. According to Golts, the real threats to Russia are from instability in Central Asia, which can be resisted alongside NATO and it is quite clear that in Afghanistan, NATO is also helping to defend Russia.<sup>32</sup> The issue of tense relations between the West, specifically NATO and Russia, is an issue of considerable debate. However, it cannot be denied that the increasingly tense relationship has made Moscow more adversarial, authoritarian and hostile towards the West and that could be instrumental in starting a neo-Cold War.

### **Future prospects**

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's 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 a 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>33</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 NATO 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 on the Alliance. Similarly, there are growing fissures in the Alliance about how to deal with Russia. 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 major 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 its 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 hostility, which might seem like NATO's salvation 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. As subsequent events would reveal, NATO, despite its many achievements, 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.

## Conclusion

As NATO completes 60 years of its existence, it has decades of eventful history behind it, which is a significant manifestation of the symbolic and functional role of the Alliance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Events indicate that the Alliance today has a global reach and has also become provocative, instead of simply resorting to its role as a defensive grouping. Continuous tensions between NATO and Russia show that the danger of a new Cold War is far from being over. The Americans and their European Allies also feel that Russia's military action in Georgia in August 2008 overturned a basic assumption made by NATO after the fall of the Soviet Union - that no countries were under the threat of invasion in Europe or Eurasia. Many questions regarding NATO's future remain unanswered. The success of its mission in Afghanistan is seen by many as its greatest test, one on which its survival rests. The former U.S. president, Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, calls Afghanistan NATO's "critical test".<sup>34</sup>

A lack of vital common interests, growing differences between the United States and the rest of the Alliance regarding issues such as burden sharing, contributions to international missions, Alliance expansion and also a capabilities gap between the American and European Allies adds to the existing challenges. The United States' push for expansion can also make the Alliance fragile as vulnerable members could become a liability and once they join the Alliance, they would be entitled to full support, even if they are militarily and economically weak. Another hurdle against cooperation is the lack of harmony between the U.S. and NATO's EU members. American unilateralism adds to the problems of unity. This is where conflicting interests come to the surface. Although the European Allies are being encouraged to become burden-sharing partners, this has not been much of a success due to their budgetary limitations. Washington's oversized role in NATO and the gap between America's military capabilities and those of its European partners is a reason to believe that the future role of the Alliance is dependent on American efforts. The future of the Alliance remains opaque but much depends on how it grapples with the numerous challenges outlined above.

## Notes & References

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