

Why NATO? Searching for Relevancy in the 21st Century

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Part One of the 'Why NATO' Project

I. A Cold War Institution

Hastings Ismay, the first Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), famously stated that NATO was meant to “keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”¹ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would be difficult to argue that NATO had been unsuccessful in attaining these goals. Russia no longer posed a substantial threat to NATO member states, substantial amounts of American political will and troops remain committed to Europe, and a resurgent and militaristic Germany is a laughable thought.

In response to this new international paradigm, one with the United States as the solitary superpower, NATO's foundational purpose suddenly became threatened by irrelevancy. Yet the alliance lived on, even in the face of no significant threats to American and Western European interests. Membership even blossomed in a post-Cold War world with twelve additional member states bringing the total membership to twenty-eight. Despite this, it is argued NATO's action in the last two decades, notably the campaign in Afghanistan and 1999 Kosovan intervention are not equatable with the founding goal of the organisation. However, in the face of a supposedly resurgent and aggressive Russia, recent events have the potential to provide renewed cause for the original mission of NATO. For an alliance which, in its original form, has purpose only when presented with a direct adversary, recent developments have complicated questions surrounding the future of NATO.

II. Dwindling American Support

While support for NATO remains strong among many policymakers, especially American ones, questions are continually being raised as to what exact purpose the alliance serves in the twenty-first century. Even amongst some atlantacists NATO is looking more and more like an anachronism of the modern age. Some no longer see NATO as vital to the security of the western world, and Americans increasingly view it as coddling of its European allies. While the United States accounts for approximately 70 percent of NATO military spending, the majority of members fail to even reach the agreed upon 2 percent GDP expenditure on defence.

¹ NPR, April 1, 2009. [Link]

Living under this American security blanket has allowed European nations to skimp on military spending and rely on the implied protection of the United States. It is simply the rational decision of a nation state to allocate funds to other more constructive means when defence spending is unnecessary. The United States makes this so.

Gone are the days where Europeans lived in fear of Soviet armour divisions pouring into Europe, and defence spending has responded accordingly. Russia is, in many ways, economically and militaristically backwards compared to its European counterparts, who are more than capable of greatly outspending the former superpower. NATO's European members possess combined economic and military power and potential that dwarfs that of modern Russia. While member states certainly deem it capable of exerting its will within a small sphere of influence (the 2008 Georgian conflict being a prime example), Russia has been viewed as only capable of being a "regional spoiler and local troublemaker"² at this juncture.

The crisis in Ukraine, however, has brought about revitalized discussion concerning the relationship of NATO and Russia going forward, as many of the more vulnerable NATO member states feel increasingly threatened by current events. While not operating under the NATO security blanket, Ukraine nonetheless provides an example of Russia's willingness to defend its interests even in the midst of economic and political backlash. Nations such as Poland have grown increasingly aware of their more vulnerable position, and an increased NATO presence has been called for. The question still remains, however, as to how severe of a military and geopolitical threat that Russia truly poses.

III. The Perils of Collective Action

Moving beyond the current 'bogeyman' view of Vladimir Putin's Russia, NATO has reached far past its original goals. In places such as Libya and Afghanistan these NATO initiatives have met varying levels of failure and inefficiency. The military alliance created solely to engage in a war with a modern and nuclear state has suddenly found itself thrust into the midst of the now pervasive hybrid warfare. In many ways, NATO has responded to these new challenges poorly.

The actions of the alliance have been "clumsy, inefficient, and violate the unity of command..."³ This is largely due to lack of fervour among member states. The invocation of Article V did bring forth support from the United States' allies in Afghanistan, but support was far from robust in many instances. Article V states that an attack against a member of NATO

² Foreign Policy, September 4, 2014. [Link]

³ Foreign Policy, June 14, 2011. [Link]

“shall be considered an attack against them all.”⁴ While the member states did respond to the agreement, the war has been far from popular among many.

The contribution of coalition soldiers cannot be understated, as they have fought and died alongside American soldiers, but the war has been a polarizing political issue. Multiple nations have placed restrictions upon the use of their soldiers. A Congressional report found that “Many NATO nations have placed ‘caveats’ on their forces deployed in Afghanistan...these caveats are intended to preclude the affected units from participating in offensive combat operations or other operations that carry high risk of casualties.”⁵ Even when involved, hesitation to risk troops in a war not of their making was evident.

In Libya, NATO involvement aroused division in NATO members, and was plagued with practical issues. Then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi spoke out against intervention, even in the midst of large-scale Italian involvement in Libya. “I had my hands tied by the vote of the parliament of my country,” Berlusconi said. “But I was against and I am against this intervention...”⁶ Additionally, German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided against involving her nation in the conflict. This disunity displays quite evidently the fractures among NATO member states. The expanded scope of NATO outside of its original and regional goals has frustrated some members.

IV. Military Impotence

Even when military action has taken place, results have been questionable in many cases. The conflict in Afghanistan has been ongoing for more than a decade, and the fate of the nation remains uncertain.

Other conflicts, however, have spoken even more poorly of military effectiveness as a coalition. In Libya, different member states faced a multitude of issues surrounding their intervention. A confidential report found that “the allies struggled to share crucial target information, lacked specialized planners and analysts, and overly relied on the United States

⁴ NATO, December 9, 2008. [Link]

⁵ Congressional Research Service, (2006), *U.S. and Coalition Military Operations in Afghanistan: Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service, p.6.

⁶ Reuters, July 7, 2011. [Link]

for reconnaissance and refuelling aircraft.”⁷ In the clearest example of this overreliance, Danish F-16s were “[running] out of bombs to continue to attack Libya.”⁸ While Denmark was one of the very first nations to offer support in Libya, a lack of military preparedness was evident.

Additionally, then Secretary of Defence Robert Gates stated that British and French forces were “struggling to maintain their actions in Libya without significant American support.”⁹ Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope said of the comments that “We are not running out, but we certainly have to take action to replace those weapons to bring stockpiles back up to where they were.”¹⁰ While largely an initiative of France and the United Kingdom, an overreliance on American support proved a great problem for military operations. The wealthiest and most advanced military alliance on the globe faced serious issues in effectively operating against an unpopular dictatorship controlling a far inferior military. NATO has quite simply failed to prove itself an effective military force in recent decades.

V. Going Forward

As the crisis in Ukraine continues to unfold, questions will continually be asked of NATO and its relevancy in a post-Cold War world. It must be decided if NATO is both equipped and willing to deal with modern threats such as ISIS, and if these threats necessitate the continued participation in an alliance formed during the Cold War. We must be willing to critically examine the military alliance, and adjust it accordingly. Whether the alliance is a remnant of a bygone age or an organization capable of reforming itself to meet challenges in the world today remains to be seen. It is no longer a matter of life and death that NATO remains a relevant force in the world, and its foundational purposes must be questioned.

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⁷ The New York Times, April 14, 2012. [Link]

⁸ DefenseNews, June 9, 2011. [Link]

⁹ Telegraph, June 13, 2011. [Link]

¹⁰ Ibid.

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