Towards a New Strategy for NATO
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At its 60th anniversary summit in April 2009, NATO’s heads of state and government agreed to draft a new, contemporary strategy for the Atlantic Alliance. The current document, the so-called Strategic Concept, was approved in 1999 and does not reflect the dramatic political developments of the last decade, including the 11 September 2001 attacks, the war in Afghanistan, transatlantic disputes over the war in Iraq (which led to what then US Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns called a ‘near-death experience’ for the Alliance) or the admission of nine new member states. Intermediate papers, such as the Comprehensive Political Guidance (approved in 2006) or the Declaration on Alliance Security (2009), have been prepared to provide the Alliance with at least some political guidance, but their general, lowest-common-denominator content could never provide serious strategic direction for NATO’s future evolution.

Thus, a new strategy is long overdue. The new Strategic Concept will be drafted in the coming months by a group of external experts – referred to as the ‘Eminent Persons’ – and is scheduled to be presented for the approval of NATO’s heads of state and government at their next summit in late 2010.

**Strategic requirements**

Given the changes in the international political landscape, the new Strategic Concept has to meet at least five requirements. First and foremost, it has to
clearly define NATO’s roles and missions. This has been attempted many
times in recent years, but the result has been a cluttered list of functions
intended to account for all foreseeable contingencies.

Hence, the second requirement will be to set priorities so that demands
may be brought in line with resources. Establishing a hierarchy of functions
will mean that elements at the bottom of the list may be omitted, even if
some NATO members might have different preferences. On the other hand,
clear priorities can function as a benchmark for members’ performance.

Thirdly, by defining a common vision for NATO, the new Strategic
Concept should become a tool for re-engaging and re-committing all NATO
member states to the core principles of the Alliance. This should include the
recognition that undivided security can only be based on undivided soli-
darity. A new consensus on these basics is necessary to counter a trend of
re-nationalisation in foreign, security and defence policy, as can be seen in
Afghanistan, where the ‘we’ in NATO operations is crucially missing.

Fourthly, the new Strategy, while necessarily grounded in the previ-
ous one, must be forward oriented. Merely re-confirming already-agreed
wording would be insufficient. Moreover, the new strategy should not be an
intellectual ‘Maginot Line’ that only codifies NATO’s *acquis communautaire*.
Instead, it must fully reflect the broadest possible range of political–military
contingencies to avoid strategic surprises.

Finally, NATO’s new strategy must contribute to winning the battle of
narratives. It must serve as a public rallying point to gather support, par-
icularly for the military dimension of security, and be seen as a strategic
communications tool vis-à-vis an increasingly critical public. This will be
all the more important as many NATO governments fail in, or refrain from,
sufficiently communicating the need for certain foreign and security poli-
cies to their electorates.

Achieving all this would be difficult enough if NATO members were
already in broad agreement about the basic purpose of the Alliance, but
this is not the case. Members’ differing historical backgrounds (today, 12
of 28 NATO countries were once in the ‘Eastern Bloc’) and geographical
settings have led to fundamentally diverging views on NATO’s current
raison d’être. The questions of how to achieve security and stability,
against whom, and with what means are answered differently by various members.

Diverging views
The differences among Alliance members become particularly apparent with respect to three key issues: the mutual security commitments detailed in Article V of the Washington Treaty, NATO’s relationship with Russia and the future role of nuclear weapons.

With respect to the way members interpret the security commitments of Article V, the divergence is obvious. NATO is a political–military alliance whose key purpose is to provide for the collective security and defence of its members. Article V encapsulates this two-pronged commitment by implying that Alliance members have the right to protect the population, security interests and territory of all NATO states. However, contrary to popular belief, Article V is not a ‘security guarantee’: it does not oblige NATO states to immediately defend their allies militarily. Instead, in the case of an attack, each member is required to take ‘such action as it deems necessary’ to restore the security of the transatlantic area; military action may be just one among several measures open to states.

Despite this flexible wording, NATO security commitments were seen as credible during the Cold War. Any Warsaw Pact soldier contemplating an incursion into NATO territory (probably in Germany) knew that such a move would trigger the Article V mechanism, and the military presence of many NATO allies on German soil made a concerted military response highly likely. Today, the meaning of Article V is much more difficult to define, and many Alliance members have their doubts with regard to the credibility of NATO’s security assurances. Moreover, there is no consensus about what the Alliance is meant to defend. Members have yet to agree on at least four questions:

- How to balance NATO’s role in defending NATO territory with its role in providing security, particularly through expedition-
ary operations and stabilisation missions far beyond NATO’s borders. It may be that there is a trade-off between the tasks. Many question whether NATO’s mission in Afghanistan can really be seen as ‘Article V at a distance’ and if the Alliance is currently able to provide for the constant defence of NATO territory when the bulk of its deployable forces are engaged in a long-term commitment in the Hindu Kush.

- How to maintain the credibility of Article V. If NATO constantly emphasises the relevance of its mutual-defence commitments, how can these be made plausible to allies and potential aggressors? Some say there is a need for contingency plans or military exercises that simulate territorial-defence scenarios, most likely on the territory of NATO’s eastern members.

- When Article V applies. During the Cold War, it was NATO policy to wait for proof that an aggression was under way before launching its own defensive operations. In an age of missile proliferation, vital threats may materialise before troops are sent in, as when long-range missiles fitted with nuclear, biological or chemical weapons are prepared for launch by potentially hostile regimes. To await proof of aggressive intentions would mean waiting for the launch of the missiles, with hardly any chance of avoiding the deadly consequences. Given these dangers, some believe it is time for NATO to discuss pre-emption as a means of providing security to members.

- How to provide for collective self-defence against new threats. Article V only defines ‘armed attacks’ as the trigger to commit allies to mutual assistance. However, attacks against computer networks (cyber attacks), the release of hazardous materials or the cut-off of energy supplies, while not ‘armed attacks’ per se, could also require a common response. Some believe the Washington Treaty should be amended to allow for a collective response in such cases.
NATO and Russia

Closely connected to the question of NATO’s role in both defence and security is the question of how to deal with Russia. This is a major issue in almost all NATO debates and has serious implications for other elements of NATO policy such as the open-door (enlargement) policy or the development of missile-defence components.

The dilemma is striking: on the one hand, NATO and Russia are engaged in a unique partnership ‘at 29’ (28 NATO members plus Russia), organised in a special forum, the NATO–Russia Council. On the other hand, a large number of NATO allies, given their history and geographic location, view Article V as primarily directed against Russia, since there is hardly any other country that could conceivably launch a military attack against NATO territory. The Georgia crisis in 2008 made things worse: media outlets in the Baltic states raised the question of how NATO might have reacted if Russia had chosen to take military action to ‘protect’ Russian minorities in Estonia or Latvia.

In response to the crisis, NATO declared that it would not return to ‘business as usual’. At the same time, however, it has said that it wishes to re-establish relations between Brussels and Moscow. Hence, it is still unclear how NATO intends to deal with its important but difficult partner. Open questions include whether a lasting relationship between NATO and Russia should be built primarily on values or common interests. The current relationship between the Alliance and Russia has been called a ‘strategic partnership’, but can NATO as a community of values really be engaged in a special partnership if a common value base is missing? The amount of influence over NATO’s decision-making that can or should be granted to Russia is disputed, as is the best way to deal with those cases where the two sides differ fundamentally, such as missile defence and enlargement. Some question whether Russia can really be an indispensable partner for NATO as long as it continues to undermine all efforts to impose pressure on Iran to stop its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Others wonder how a close relationship could be maintained if Russia’s self-assertiveness (and, in the eyes of some allies, its aggression) were to increase. Achieving a common position regarding relations with Moscow promises to be difficult given that
historical experiences with Russia differ so widely within the Alliance and that a significant number of NATO members regard Russia as a threat to their security and territorial integrity.

The nuclear element
One topic that long seemed to be of secondary interest, but that is likely to return to the political limelight, is the nuclear question.

The reasons for the nuclear renaissance in NATO’s strategic debates are manifold. Iran is actively pursuing a nuclear-weapons capability and has responded neither to the threat of sanctions nor to political and economic incentives offered by the international community. Soon, Tehran may be in a position to conduct a nuclear test explosion. This might force other countries in the region to strive for nuclear weapons as well, and would catapult questions of nuclear threats and nuclear deterrence high on the political agenda. Current unrest in Iran is unlikely to change this gloomy picture as even the opposition in Iran holds the view that ‘Persia’ has every right to demonstrate its importance by mastering the most ambitious technologies.

A similar situation could emerge in Asia. North Korea, which joined the club of nuclear powers in 2006, is unwilling to scrap the nuclear devices it has already produced, regardless of its promises to end its nuclear programme. The country recently carried out another nuclear test, and is actively pursuing long-range missile technology. As the country’s expertise in nuclear weaponry increases, so too does the danger of nuclear proliferation in the region.

These trends not only sound the death knell for the persistent pipe dream of a nuclear-free world, but also demand that NATO reflect more thoroughly on the role of its nuclear capabilities. The 1999 Strategic Concept limited itself to very general statements about the continuing relevance of nuclear weapons. Today, NATO must be clear about the purpose of its nuclear forces stationed in Europe, the kind of enemy against which they are directed, and the contingencies in which they might have a role. The Alliance must determine whether its current nuclear capabilities are in line with the deterrence requirements of the twenty-first century or, if not, how the gap between military hardware and political needs could be bridged.
Towards a New Strategy for NATO

Whether the deployment of US nuclear weapons on European soil is necessary for the credibility of nuclear commitments or of NATO’s resolve – or, if not, whether these weapons could be withdrawn – is still unclear, and the Alliance must consider how the Eastern European NATO members might react to a potential removal of US nuclear forces from Europe.

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None of the key questions facing NATO – whether on Article V, Russia or nuclear policy – can be fully answered right now. Consequently, developing a new, meaningful strategy that sets a clear course and provides guidelines for sober, prudent planning will be extremely demanding. The process might deepen the cracks within the Alliance and bring out the fundamentally different positions among member states. Still, NATO cannot avoid a painful but mind-clearing strategic debate if it wishes to be strategically prepared for future challenges. It is time for NATO governments to stop shirking their responsibility to engage their publics in educated debate about the basics of foreign and security policy to prepare the way for a reinvigorated understanding among the allies.