Research Division
NATO Defense College

NATO@70

NDC POLICY BRIEF
No. 24 – November 2019

Calibrating the scope of NATO's mandate

Thierry Tardy *

Anniversaries are opportunities to look back at what has been achieved and to look forward to what ought to be changed and, possibly, improved. Having reached a mature age, an anniversary can also be an occasion to ponder deeper questions of self-identity, purpose and ambition.

In 2019 NATO turned 70, and if, overall, it can be proud of what it has achieved for the security of its citizens since 1949, there are also challenges that constrain its full success as a security actor. More specifically, since 2014, the combination of the Alliance's two main missions of "deterrence and defence" and "projecting stability", furthermore in a context of transatlantic turbulence and deep tension among member states, has raised a number of questions about NATO's capacity to remain united and fit for purpose.

While the security environment is increasingly complex, with constantly evolving threats, and adversaries challenging established state actors and the way they fight, how should NATO further adapt to remain relevant? While conflicts are increasingly "hybrid", should NATO embrace the largest portfolio possible to match the various layers of hybridity, or should it stay focused on what it does best – delivering hard power? Probably both: staying focused might be an option in an ideal world, but in fact, broadening the scope of NATO's mandate will be difficult to resist.

* Director of the Research Division, NATO Defense College.

A successful political-military alliance…

From its inception in 1949, NATO has always developed as a political-military organization, meaning that while it was by nature a military alliance delivering military outcomes, it was also a political club, made up of countries with shared interests and values that justified their presence in the organization. In this sense, NATO could not be compared to the Warsaw Pact which belonged to a different species.

Throughout the Cold War, this political-military dimension shaped NATO and its member states' policies; it acted as an instrument for their rapprochement and, to an extent, forged inherently converging strategic cultures. This not only produced interoperability and joint military doctrine, but also a security community of countries and people sharing more than just a common threat.[1] It is this sense of community that enabled NATO to survive the end of the Cold War and the geostrategic turbulence that followed. NATO was then able to expand and in so doing to become one pillar in the new liberal order, finding a new mission for itself in the crisis management agenda, which almost replaced the (at the time) less central core task of collective defence. While displaying the ability to adapt, rather successfully, NATO also entered a world of profound uncertainty.

…challenged by a constantly evolving security environment

One key challenge for any security actor is to respond adequately to evolving threats, i.e. to design and implement coherent policy responses. In this context, the nature of the current threats to international security, and to NATO in particular, plays against the Alliance's

1 P.V. Jakobsen and J. Ringsmose, "Victim of its own success: how NATO's difficulties are caused by the absence of a unifying existential threat", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol.16, No.1, 2018, pp.51-52.

core business and comparative advantages. At heart, NATO is a military instrument. It thinks and acts in military terms and deeds, in contrast to, say, the European Union, which is fundamentally a civilian actor.

In the world that NATO is facing, threats such as Russia or ISIS, show how central a military posture or response needs to be; how deterrence, or coercion, are indispensable to the preservation of stability and NATO values.

This said, many of the current threats are of a different nature and do not necessarily elicit a military response. They can take the form of random urban attacks using ramming vehicles (in the case of terrorism); the disruption of communication channels and IT networks (in the case of cyber); overt and covert activities using artificial intelligence, automation and big data processing (in the case of political warfare); or the mix of some traditional *modus operandi* and covert, non-state-led, violent actions (in the case of hybrid threats); not to mention organized crime or the potential destabilizing effect of illegal migration. The fact that the perpetrators of these criminal and malicious acts are not necessarily military, nor do they use military means to attack (or even fire a shot), must inform about the nature of the response, in a discussion that prescribes a shift from defence to security; or maybe one is simply talking about the evolution of warfare.[2]

Any broadening of NATO's mandate would also be resisted as it would risk diluting NATO's war-fighting capability

Furthermore, these threats are positioned along a spectrum that takes no notice of national borders and where, in some cases, there is no external connection or attribution is impossible. Home-grown terrorism can be as devastating as externally-driven attacks. This is what the internal-external security nexus is about, i.e. the intertwining of internal and external security spaces that can no longer be conceived of as distinct.

These two sets of characteristics pertaining to the nature of threats and the nature of the security environment are challenging NATO's posture as they require a set of policy responses that is arguably far broader than what can be produced by a military institution focused on external defence.

For NATO, this state of affairs poses the deceptive dilemma of either broadening its security agenda or staying focused on the military domain. In both cases to remain relevant.

2 See E. Fassi, S. Lucarelli, A. Marrone, *What NATO for what threats? Warsaw and Beyond,* Istituto Affari Internazionali, University of Bologna, Allied Command Transformation, 2015.

Enlarging NATO's agenda…

Acquiring a mandate or the capacity to tackle a broad range of threats would imply that NATO move in two directions: towards more security-type activities, as opposed to defence-focused ones; and towards more internal issues.

The shift to security is not new and is inherent to NATO's role; it has by and large been experimented in crisis management operations as well as in counter-terrorism, where NATO has deployed military assets to perform activities that were often closer to policing tasks than to genuine military undertakings. NATO's role in Afghanistan's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), or in humanitarian relief operations, provides more specific examples of NATO operating at the frontier of military core tasks to respond to broader security needs. More generally, the debate about a possible role for NATO in connection with civilian crisis management activities also falls within the logic of broadening its security agenda.

Applied to the current security landscape, this logic would give NATO a more assertive role in defensive/offensive cyber activities (with cyberspace being an operational domain possibly covered by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty); in the fight against organized crime networks, *inter alia* through maritime security; as well as in the broader security sector reform (SSR) agenda of partner countries, to give just a few examples. This is partly what NATO's newly-framed Projecting Stability is about. In all these tasks coercion and military effect are not absent, but they are not as fundamental as in traditional defence.

Second, looking inwards would mean that NATO play an increased role in the defence against internal threats by contributing to: critical infrastructure protection and resilience building; police-type activities such as anti-terrorist operations in European cities; operations to tackle the security consequences of (massive) migrant flows; or supporting police forces facing under-the-radar hybrid-type non-conventional attacks.

Although this range of tasks would make sense when assessed against the broad security needs of NATO member states and societies, and may be justified for good political reasons, they carry a number of risks for NATO as a military alliance. Issues pertaining to capacity and resources, expertise, legitimacy, and political backing by member states would be raised. The broad civilian security field is already crowded and NATO would face competition in areas where it would come in a weaker position. From SSR in Sub-Saharan Africa to policing and border tasks within European states, actors like the EU, national administrations, police forces and NGOs would not necessarily welcome a role for NATO.

Any broadening of NATO's mandate would also be resisted as it would risk diluting NATO's war-fighting capability. Contemporary war-fighting is arguably po-

litically, financially and operationally demanding; any parallel effort can therefore be seen as a deleterious diversion.[3]

…versus keeping NATO focused and partnering with others

The second option for NATO is therefore to focus on its military identity and push for a sound division of tasks among a large range of security actors, in keeping with the comparative advantage of each of the parties. This is the starting point for the comprehensive/integrated/whole-of-government approach: because no single actor can do it all, all must accept working with others.

NATO's comparative advantage stems from its nature as a political-military Alliance composed of some of the most powerful and militarily-experienced states. Those assets can be put into two categories. Politically, we refer to the capacity: to deter the most powerful military adversaries; to be a forum for strategy-making;[4] to act as the framework for defining and implementing the defence policies of most of its member states; to be a source of legitimacy for operations; and to provide political clout.

In more operational terms, it indicates a capacity: to carry out military operations covering the entire operational spectrum, including the most complex tasks; to carry out large-scale exercises; to provide interoperability among member states; to supply planning assets and a command and control structure for complex operations; to give expertise on a wide range of military-related issues, including defence capacity-building, defence sector reform, training, counter-IED, etc.

The return of "deterrence and defence" following the 2014 Ukraine crisis has brought these two sets of assets back to the fore.

In this military-focused role, the right balance is to be struck between capacities and doctrines for counter-insurgency operations and other types of asymmetrical warfare on the one hand, and those for more traditional war-fighting on the other, for which the know-how may need to be re-learned.[5] Current policy literature refers to the need for NATO to keep the military edge in an ever more interconnected environment; to remain militarily credible, acquire high-end capabilities, enter the digital age and constantly anticipate.[6] For those activities NATO exhibits un-matched potential and legitimacy, and can therefore claim to be in the lead.

Staying focused suggests that some of the "new threats" are not for NATO to tackle but will be better handled by others, and that the Alliance can, as a result, only be *one part* of the answer, very seldom *the* answer. Accordingly, NATO will only play a secondary role in the cyber domain (where member states will have the lead with strong involvement by the private sector); in projecting stability (where the UN, the European Union, regional organizations, states, or local actors will play the bigger part); or in the efforts made in relation to military mobility (where states and the EU are in the lead).

By its very nature, the Projecting Stability domain involves a large range of tasks and actors, often only marginally of a military kind. NATO's engagement in Afghanistan gave birth to the concept of the Comprehensive Approach and showed, if anything, how ISAF was only one of the actors in the play and could only produce an effect if other levels were simultaneously operating.

Staying focused suggests that some of the "new threats" are not for NATO to tackle but will be better handled by others, and that the Alliance can, as a result, only be one part of the answer, very seldom the answer

In Libya, while Operation "Unified Protector" arguably delivered on its narrow military mandate to "protect civilians"[7], the operation suffered from: a flawed strategic vision to which it should have been subordinated; parallel actions taken by states with differing interpretations of UNSC resolution 1973; and the difficulty of ensuring a presence on Libyan territory so as to prevent the country's dislocation once the NATO operation was over. On these three levels the long term success of NATO operations is inevitably a function of the deeds of others.

It follows that NATO's policy and success will often be dependent on other actors who may be willing to play the game with NATO because of higher stakes, but who may also diverge with NATO on objectives and methods. In many cases, ranging from Iraq and Libya, to Tunisia and Jordan, NATO will not be the most powerful actor, nor the most strategic. This suggests a degree of humility in what can be achieved: in many situations problems will be managed rather than solved, and this is not necessarily easy to accept for an institution like NATO.[8]

3 B. Stapleton, "Out of area ops are out: reassessing the NATO mission", *War on the Rocks*, 7 July 2016.

4 See D. A. Ruiz Palmer, "A strategic odyssey: constancy of purpose and strategy-making in NATO", *NDC Research Paper* No.3, Rome, April 2019.

5 See T. Greenwood and P. Savage, "In search of a 21st-Century Joint Warfighting Concept", *War on the rocks*, September 2019.

6 See "Framework for Future Alliance Operations", SHAPE and ACT, 2018; "Strategic Foresight Analysis", ACT, 2017.

7 UN Security Council Resolution 1973, 17 March 2011, para.4.

8 See R. Haass, "Assessing the value of the NATO Alliance", Testimony before the US Congress, 5 September 2018.

The inevitable two-track approach

From the above, one could logically come to the conclusion that NATO should focus on its military identity, and cooperate with others on most other tasks. In practical terms however, a neat division of labour will be problematic, and the push for a certain broadening is likely to be irresistible.

First, no matter how important military tasks are, they may well cover too narrow a spectrum of activities to justify the existence of the Alliance in the long run. Relevance is about providing responses to current problems; this calls for constant adaptation and an inherent broadening of an institution's mandate. By staying focused NATO would run the risk of leaving aside too many of the current threats, and possibly letting others acquire a role in their management. For these reasons activities such as maritime security, cyber security or security sector reform will remain important to NATO.

Second, regardless of whether NATO is the appropriate tool, is there any alternative? One of NATO's advantages is to provide a strategic-level response that is often difficult to find when the Alliance is absent. This hints at the role of the EU and its ambition to play a strategic level role that still needs to be achieved.

Third, even from an operational point of view, a narrow military approach is difficult to reconcile with the evolution of warfare. To start with, the most hardcore military activities will require some connection with the softer dimensions that any military actor must, to an extent, develop.

Most importantly, broadening the agenda becomes more relevant even when we consider collective defence in reference to the Eastern flank and the containment of Russia.

There, hardcore defence goes hand in hand with the necessity to develop resilient societies and tackle threats that are potentially both external and internal (due to their hybrid nature), rendering imperative not only cooperation with civil societies, municipalities, the private sector, non-NATO EU member states (Sweden and Finland in particular) and the European Commission, but also a certain know-how in these domains. This is true for Article 5 situations, and even more so in any scenario for NATO action below the Article 5 threshold.

If, as often suggested,[9] a Russian incursion into NATO territory were to take the form of "little green men" taking key positions in (and destabilizing) cities in a Baltic state, together with multi-tracked cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns (which would most likely start much earlier than any physical incursion), apart from the debate about invoking Article 5, would NATO's response not inevitably be multi-faceted, combining high-end rapid reaction military interventions and lower end military-civilian actions? Or in other words, would NATO's response not be at the crossroads between internal and external security and defence? Is this not simply what modern warfare is all about?[10]

Interestingly enough, it is in these scenarios that NATO's core task of collective defence and the more non-traditional internal and police-type tasks come together. So, even a focus on collective defence brings NATO closer to a non-traditional, non-military-centric agenda. This is the nature of contemporary threat management: by definition multi-layered, non-linear, and hybrid.

In this context, what matters is probably less making a choice between the narrow and the broad paths than calibrating the extent of the broadening.[11] Here is the relevance challenge: NATO must keep its military edge and be able to prevail in future military operations, while sufficiently enlarging the scope of its mandate so that it can respond to the most acute contemporary threats.

This implies at least four sets of conclusions: first, the NATO of the Cold War era is no longer a useful point of comparison; the threat environment is simply too different today. Second, maintaining a comparative advantage in the military domain is a priority, failing that, NATO's added value will be at stake. Third, the nature of the threats means that NATO must to a degree embrace a wider security agenda: hybridity calls for it. Finally, partnering with others is vital since there are issues that are simply not NATO's responsibility but that are, nonetheless, essential to NATO's mission.

9 See M. O'Hanlon, "Can America still protect its Allies? How to make deterrence work", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.98, No.5, 2019, p.198; "'They will die in Tallinn': Estonia girds for war with Russia", *Politico*, 10 July 2018.

10 As M. Galeotti puts it, "what is being called hybrid war should really simply be called 'war'", *Russian Political war. Moving beyond the hybrid*, Routledge, 2019, p.8.

11 See J. Shea, "NATO at 70: an opportunity to recalibrate", *NATO Review*, April 2019.

Research Division
Thierry Tardy, PhD, Series Editor
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook
at *https://twitter.com/NDC_Research*
at *https://facebook.com/NDC_Research*
NDC Policy Brief
ISSN 2617-6009