

NATO's future: a history

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Bruno Tertrais

Deputy Director, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique

How was the future of NATO envisioned in the past? Is the Atlantic Alliance still faithful to the original intents of its founders? The purpose of this short paper is to take a look back at how NATO's purpose was conceived and how leaders and experts saw its future, in order to draw lessons for the coming decades. Pessimism about the solidity and survivability of the Alliance turned out to be misplaced, but assumptions about some of its fundamental tenets were not always correct.

Summary

Past pessimism about the solidity and survivability of the Alliance turned out to be misplaced, but assumptions about some of its fundamental tenets were not always correct.

Doomsayers have been proven wrong. Internal tensions and external challenges have never brought the Alliance to a breaking point.

After 75 years of existence, NATO appears to be a historical anomaly. A few lessons to ensure its longevity stem from this retrospective. NATO would be wise to stick with its core mission: deterrence and defense against an armed attack. Attempts to alter the rules and procedures of the Alliance risk endangering its foundations.

NATO's early future

The founders of NATO saw it as “a powerful deterrent to war”¹ or “a shield against aggression and fear of aggression”.² But the Treaty was meant to establish a political more than a military alliance, and an alliance more than an organization. For instance, the now-largely forgotten Article 2 of the Treaty states that “The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.”³

Initial NATO defense planning, based on the Alliances first Strategic Concept (DC 6/1, December 1949) and Military Guidance (MC 14, March 1950) did not envision more than coordination of national forces. But the military dimension of NATO grew rapidly with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. The Seventh Army was re-activated at Stuttgart in late November 1950, the V and VII Corps headquarters were organized, and four divisions were moved back to Europe from the U.S. The first to arrive was the 4th Infantry Division in May 1951, followed by the 2nd Armored Division and the

43rd and 28th Infantry Divisions during the Summer and Fall of 1951. A new joint U.S. European Command was established on 1 August 1952. Still, the U.S. presence was meant to be temporary, not a multi-decades one. As two experts summarized it, “Throughout the 1950s, under Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, the United States saw its leadership role on the continent as a temporary expedient. As soon as European integration had proceeded far enough for a ‘third force’ to emerge capable of balancing Soviet power on its own, the United States would withdraw from its forward positions and recede into the background”.⁴

Throughout the Cold War, NATO planning was based on the assumption that the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact had aggressive and expansionist designs on Europe. Communism was judged to be by its very nature an expansionist design. The canonical scenario against which the Atlantic Alliance was to protect itself against was a massive air, sea and land assault against Western Europe.

A core U.S. view in the early days was that NATO should not be expanded too much, for fear that Washington would not be able to fulfill its defense commitments. This reflected the classic fear of “overextension”. An important U.S. Department of State memorandum written by George Kennan recommended in 1948 that membership be limited to countries “whose homeland or insular territories are washed by the waters of the North Atlantic, or which form part of

Will NATO survive *détente*?

MANLIO BROGIO

THIS article considers a very broad and penetrating theme: ‘Will NATO survive *détente*?’ Discussing the theme does not necessarily mean giving a definite answer and coming to any clear-cut conclusion about it. There are at least two reasons for this. First, that a clear-cut answer postulates an agreed definition of what we mean by *détente*, and even of what we mean by NATO, whether we mean the Organization in its present form, or a modified one, or simply the North Atlantic Alliance or any development of it. Second, and perhaps the main reason, that I am not a historian, and even less a crystal-ball gazer, but a practical diplomat with a special international responsibility, and as such I am not inclined to foresee the future, but rather to help shape it, interpreting, conciliating, and encouraging the highest possible degree of common action by our fifteen Allied countries. A historian who foresees the future is perhaps the most controversial kind of historian; while governments and their assistants, be they national diplomats or international officials, have the

Exhibit A. Original extract from: M. Brosio, “Will NATO survive *détente*?”, *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 27, No. 6, June 1971, pp. 231-241.

- 1 State Department Press Release, Transcript of Broadcast, 18 March 1949, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/state-department-press-release-transcript-broadcast?documentid=NA&pagenumber=9>
- 2 Harry S. Truman, Address at the Occasion of the Signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, 4 April 1949, <https://www.trumanlibraryinstitute.org/this-day-in-history-nato/>
- 3 NATO, The North Atlantic Treaty, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm
- 4 John M. Schuessler & Joshua R. Shinfrinson, “The Shadow of Exit from NATO,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Fall 2019, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-13_Issue-3/Schuessler.pdf

a close union of states which meets this description". Failing to use such objective criteria would create, according to this view, a never-ending string of requests for membership from most non-Communist countries in Europe, Africa and Asia which would, if denied, create frustration and a sense of abandonment, or, if accepted, *"could lead only to one of two results; either all these alliances become meaningless declarations (...) and join the long array of dead-letter pronouncements through which governments have professed their devotion to peace in the past; or this country becomes still further over-extended"*.⁵ In addition, a recurring preoccupation in the United States was that enlargement would make consensus more difficult.

Finally, throughout the last decades of the Cold War, pessimism about the future of NATO was frequent. "Will NATO survive?" was a common headline in expert commentariat.⁶ Many observers would have been pleasantly surprised if, say, in 1984, they had been told that the Atlantic Alliance would celebrate with fanfare its 75th anniversary in 2024.

Can NATO Survive?

*Ronald D. Asmus, Robert D. Blackwill, and
F. Stephen Larrabee*

IN THE EARLY postwar period, the North Atlantic Alliance was created with a strategic mission directed against the Soviet Union that remained powerful for more than 40 years. With the disappearance of that central organizing mission and of the USSR itself, the strength and effectiveness of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are eroding because of a growing divergence in perceptions of national interests and policy priorities between the United States and its European allies. The four-year crisis in Bosnia has underscored this divide, but NATO's difficulties lie deeper. The United States faces a new global international security agenda. Events in Europe, while noteworthy, are no longer as central to American concerns. The European allies of the United States in NATO, however, remain focused on stabilizing the Continent. In strategic terms, Western Europe remains insular if not isolationist.

Exhibit B. Original extract from: R. D. Asmus, R. D. Blackwill, F. S. Larrabee, "Can NATO survive?", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1996, pp. 79-101.

⁵ "(...) a North Atlantic security pact might properly embrace any country whose homeland or insular territories are washed by the waters of the North Atlantic, or which form part of a close union of states which meets this description. (...) But to go beyond this, and to take in individual continental countries which do not meet this description would (...) be unsound. (...) the admission of any single country beyond the North Atlantic area would be taken by others as constituting a precedent, and would almost certainly lead to a series of demands from states still further afield that they be similarly treated. Failure on our part to satisfy these further demands would then be interpreted as lack of interest in the respective countries, and as evidence that we had "written them off" to the Russians. Beyond the Atlantic area, which is a clean-cut concept, and which embraces a real community of defense interest firmly rooted in geography and tradition, there is no logical stopping point in the development of a system of anti-Russian alliances until that system has circled the globe and has embraced all the non-communist countries of Europe, Asia and Africa. To get carried into any such wide system of alliances could lead only to one of two results; either all these alliances become meaningless declarations, after the pattern of the Kellogg Pact, and join the long array of dead-letter pronouncements through which governments have professed their devotion to peace in the past; or this country becomes still further over-extended, politically and militarily". Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. Department of State, 24 November 1948, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d182>

⁶ Manlio Brosio, "Will NATO Survive Détente?", *The World Today*, vol. 27, n° 6, June 1971, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40394510>; Stanley Korber, "Can NATO Survive?", *International Affairs*, vol. 59, n° 3, Summer 1983, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2618789>; Ronald D. Asmus, Robert D. Blackwill & F. Stephen Larrabee, "Can NATO Survive?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 19, n° 2, 1996, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01636609609550198>

How wrong we were

On all these points, history turned out to be very different from what was envisioned or forecasted.

Although the members of the Atlantic community managed, overall, to maintain the “*peaceful and friendly international relations*” called for by the Treaty, the goal of “*eliminating conflict in their international economic policies*” was hardly achieved. In fact, a paradox of transatlantic relations is that even though European integration was encouraged by the United States, the creation of the European Communities and later of the European Union aggravated economic competition between the two sides of the Atlantic. This should not be seen as a “failure of NATO”: more an abandonment of one of the Treaty’s goals.

Far from being a “*temporary expedient*”, the U.S. military presence in Europe ended up being massive and permanent. Between 1953 and 1989, U.S. forces never numbered less than 300,000, and there are still today some 70,000 U.S. soldiers on the continent. This stemmed from a combination of European desire to have a strong American presence for both reassurance and deterrence, but also of a U.S. recognition that such a strong presence was in its interest. A key condition was the American nationality of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), which allowed the general officer to be dual-hatted and also be the commanding officer of U.S. Forces, Europe.

Obviously, the Soviet Union never attacked any NATO country. It is tempting to make this a result of NATO’s strength – bolstered by nuclear weapons – which deterred Moscow to engage in large-scale military aggression against the West. But there is no evidence that the Soviet Union had plans to attack NATO. (One reason being that it feared nuclear war.) In fact, the opposite was true: archives and interviews testify to the extreme paranoia of Soviet leaders, in line with a long history of Russian fears.⁷ The invasion of Afghanistan skewed Western analyses of Moscow’s intentions. We now know that in 1980, for instance, many in the United States feared a Soviet invasion of Iran, whereas the Soviet Union actually feared a U.S. intervention in the country.⁸ Or that many NATO exercises were seen as provocative by Moscow, possibly heralding an aggression against the East.⁹

The addition of new members was never *per se* an obstacle to consensus, because consensus has depended much more on the existence U.S. leadership than on the number of countries belonging to the Alliance, and because post-Cold war new members have been overall pro-American. Enlargement has not resulted in over-extension:

Most importantly, doomsayers have been proven wrong. Internal tensions and external challenges have never brought the Alliance to a breaking point. After 75 years of existence, NATO appears to be a historical anomaly. This deserves an explanation.

Explaining NATO’s longevity

NATO is a historical anomaly in the sense that no such large multinational defense alliance has ever lasted three-quarters of a century while continuously adding members and not losing any. (The 1948 Rio Treaty is arguably one year older, but – apart from the fact that it was never militarily structured as NATO is – it has lost several members since its inception.)

Three decades ago, RAND scientist Richard Kugler explained NATO’s endurance by “*alliance cohesion*”.¹⁰ But how to explain that cohesion? An essential factor has been the combination of the consensus rule with U.S. leadership. Washington has to take into account its allies’ views and objections but as NATO’s biggest contributor, it has the loudest voice. NATO takes all decisions by leadership-based consensus. It is also an alliance where political guidance from the top is constantly given – notably since the end of the Cold War: summits of Heads of State and Government have now become annual.

Another key factor has been that despite the rapid obsolescence of the economic dimension of Article 2, “the” Alliance quickly became more than just “an” alliance. It is what political scientists call a “security community”. Walter Lippman had it right when he surmised that the new pact described a “*community of interests that was much older than the conflict with the Soviet Union and would therefore outlast it*”.¹¹ NATO has always been a multifunctional organization. The existence of NATO helped German and Italian democratization, acted as a dampener against the return of militarism (and after the Cold war against the “rena-tionalization of defense”), and contributed to European integration. Lord Ismay’s overquoted 1952 words – “*to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down*”¹² – had a more than a kernel of truth. This also means that when the Communist block dissolved, NATO could still claim that other functions were still relevant. “NATO endured because while the Soviet Union was no more, the Alliance’s two other original if unspoken mandates still held: to deter the rise of militant nationalism and to provide the foundation of collective

⁷ Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know?’”, *Review Essay, The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, n° 2, April 1999, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2650378>; William Burr & Svetlana Savranskaya, “Previously Classified Interviews with Former Soviet Officials Reveal U.S. Intelligence Failure Over Decades”, *The National Security Archive*, 11 September 2009, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb285/index.htm>

⁸ James M. Acton & Nicole Grajewski, “The Forgotten World War III Scare of 1980”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 June 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/09/cold-war-soviet-union-world-war-iii-1980-iran-china/>

⁹ Nate Jones (ed.), *Able Archer 83. The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, New York, (The New Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Richard L. Kugler, “Commitment to Purpose: How Alliance Partnership Won the Cold War,” The Rand Corporation, 1993, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR190.html

¹¹ Michael Rühle, “From Pacifism to Nuclear Deterrence: Norman Angell and the Founding of NATO,” *Information Series n° 582*, National Institute for Public Policy, 4 April 2024, https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-from-pacifism-to-nuclear-deterrence-norman-angell-and-the-founding-of-nato-no-582-april-4-2024/

¹² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Leaders, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_137930.htm

security that would encourage democratization and political integration in Europe.”¹³ NATO sometimes had a *de facto* collective security function by reducing bilateral rivalries, in particular between Greece and Türkiye. This community developed through a web of mutual cooperations and dependencies: a network of multinational commands where allies were given top responsibilities; common norms to ensure interoperability, practiced by exercises; and also the procedure known as nuclear sharing, through which the forces of non-nuclear allies can carry U.S. nuclear bombs.

A final explanation is probably that members never attempted to change its fundamental structures and principles. Had a real debate been opened about the pillars of the Washington Treaty – the unanimous agreement rule, or the area covered by the Treaty – it may have led to its demise. Political consultation beyond security issues has never been a core day-to-day mission of the Organization. In 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron famously warned that we were experiencing “*the brain death of NATO*”.¹⁴ But in so doing, he was complaining about the lack of solidarity among allies on Syria and referring to the transatlantic alliance as a political one, not to the military organization. In fact, one could argue that allowing for “breathing space” where allies can strategically disagree on key security issues outside the Washington Treaty’s focus and area is one of the reasons behind NATO’s endurance.

Lessons for the future

A few lessons to ensure the longevity of NATO stem from this retrospective.

First, NATO would be wise to stick with its core mission, which is collective deterrence and defense against an external “armed attack” (whatever its nature, including terrorism, cyber, etc.) in the Treaty area. Although the Alliance successfully adapted to organize and implement peace support and counterterrorism missions, the current hardening of the geostrategic environment, and the resurgence of Russia as a major military challenge for Europe, suggest that the focus of the Organization should continue to be Article 5 of the Treaty in the area defined by its Article 6. The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is a useful forum to discuss other common challenges, but suggestions to bolster the political role of NATO – which have been many since the mid-1950s and were never really followed through – risk exposing disagreements rather than create consensus.

Any attempts to alter the rules and procedures of the Alliance bear the risk of endangering its very foundations. U.S. leadership is a key. A “European pillar of NATO”, if it meant the creation of a European caucus at the NAC table, would probably make consensus-building more difficult. Suggestions to make SACEUR a European position would weaken the coupling between U.S. and European military forces. Withdrawing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, or reducing their role in favor of missile defense,

Can NATO survive?

STANLEY KOBER*

America’s relations with its European allies are going through yet another period of crisis. NATO has been a ‘troubled partnership’ ever since its inception, and observers may be forgiven if they view the current difficulties with a sense of *déjà vu*. Nevertheless, there are indications that the present crisis may be significantly different from those that preceded it. In the past, troubles in the alliance stemmed from national resentment by the Europeans of American dominance. But even though the French went so far as to adopt a ‘*tous azimuths*’ doctrine, there was no widespread sentiment that the US nuclear umbrella was more of a threat to Europe than a guarantee of its security. What is distinctive about the present crisis, therefore, is that even while Soviet troops ravage Afghanistan and threaten Poland, there are mass demonstrations in Western Europe condemning America’s nuclear presence as a threat. How has this come to pass, and what can be done about it?

Exhibit C. Original extract from: S. Kober, “Can NATO Survive?”, *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Oxford University Press, Vol. 59, No. 3, Summer 1983, pp. 339-349.

¹³ NATO International Secretariat, “A Short History of NATO”, 3 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_139339.htm

¹⁴ “Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead”, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

would severe or weaken an important factor of risks- and responsibilities-sharing. The consensus rule is sometimes challenged, on the grounds that it allows a member State to single-handedly block or delay consensus. However, it has never prevented the Council from making an important decision in time. (The Organization also has been fairly creative in terms of caveats and “opt-out” clauses.) Overall, as an expert put it, the consensus rule has been “*more helpful than harmful*”.¹⁵

Another key lesson of the Cold war is that Western governments and organizations may base their planning on erroneous strategic assumptions. As stated above, the main metric used by NATO to define its force structure and planning during the Cold war was the risk of a massive combined attack of the Warsaw Pact. Perhaps Western governments need to be better aware of the risk of misperceptions which, in turn, fuel what political scientists call the “security dilemma”: arming yourself may lead the adversary to believe that you may attack him, which in turn leads him to develop a more aggressive defense posture. This is not to say that NATO should not plan at all for worst-case scenarios (including because such planning helps reassuring allies). After all, this is what defense establishments should do. But it means that the Alliance should never underestimate the level of true paranoia that its adversaries can reach. Asides from the Soviet Union, examples include China, which never believed that the United States accidentally bombed its embassy in 1999.¹⁶ Or Iraq, which at the turn of the century could not believe that the Central Intelligence Agency did not know it had disbanded its weapons of mass destruction stocks.¹⁷ In both cases, the perception (wrongly) existed that “the United States intelligence is so good that it cannot make such mistakes”.

As NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary, there are good reasons for self-congratulations and even a sense of triumphalism, but this is no reason for complacency. The sense of rejuvenation that has been fostered by the Ukrainian tragedy should not create false hopes. Most

European countries are no longer the fast-growing, young societies of the Cold War: defense spending may become more difficult to justify as the social spending for ageing populations compete with military expenses. The fact that one has lived 75 years does not necessarily mean that it will live 100. Like individuals, all alliances are mortal. And accidents may happen. Four of them need to be thought about and war-gamed:

- *Withdrawal*. What if a U.S. nationalist or isolationist president decided to suddenly withdraw U.S. forces or announce his or her willingness to withdraw from the Organization? Or if a European member decided to withdraw from the military commands, as two members did in the past (France and Greece)?
- *Conflict*. What if there was an open military conflict between two members of the Alliance? How would it be seen by adversaries and what consequences would it have on force availability?
- *Dissensus*. It is fair to say that Article 5 has never really been tested. Of course, it was declared in 2001, but this was a “risk-free” move for most members, since they were not expected to go to war. What if a limited Russian military aggression against a Member State failed to achieve consensus on Article 5 (which may just be the purpose of such an attack)? What if it happened at the fringes of the North Atlantic, where some may claim is not covered by Article 6 (although the U.S. position at the time of the Treaty’s signature was that its limit was “*the North Pole*”)?¹⁸
- *Asia*. It is largely expected that a sudden major war in East Asia involving a U.S. *de jure* or *de facto* (Taiwan) ally would immediately lead Washington to rebalance its commitments and reduce the forces – certainly air and maritime – earmarked to reassure and defend Europe. How would Europe (and Russia) react to such a sudden scenario?

¹⁵ Leo Michel, “NATO Decision-Making: Is the ‘Consensus Rule’ Still Fit For Purpose?,” *FOI Memo 8507*, FOI, April 2024, p. 5, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208507>

¹⁶ Peter Hays Gries, “Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing”, *The China Journal*, n° 46, July 2001, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3182306>

¹⁷ Steve Coll, *The Achilles Trap. Saddam Hussein, The CIA, and The Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq*, New York, Penguin Press, 2024.

¹⁸ Dean Acheson quoted in Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, *The Birth of NATO*, undated, <https://adst.org/2014/10/the-birth-of-nato/>

Research Division

NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1
00143 Rome – Italy

www.ndc.nato.int

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