

***NATO IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
WHAT PURPOSE, WHAT MISSIONS?***

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Introduction

As the nineteen members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) contemplate the future of the Alliance in the next century, they are confronted with a notable paradox. Following initial doubts and debate in the years following the cold war's demise, it is now widely agreed that NATO is the premier security organization in Europe. In contrast to the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and even the United Nations (UN), the Atlantic Alliance is viewed by members and non-members alike as Europe's "go-to" organization in those cases where the threat or use of force is deemed appropriate in and around Europe. NATO attained this status by outperforming the other organizations in bringing peace, albeit belatedly, to the Balkans – first in Bosnia and later in Kosovo. It also proved to be more adept at meeting the needs and aspiration of central and eastern European countries yearning to become a recognized part of the west. While the EU concentrated on expanding its membership by initially incorporating rich, formerly neutral European countries, NATO opened its doors to the east, inviting the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to join while affirming that membership would remain open to all qualified European countries.

Notwithstanding NATO's leading status today, the fundamental purpose of the Atlantic Alliance in the post-cold war world remains essentially contested. Its members – old and new alike – have yet to fully agree on what a military organization born and raised in response to an overwhelming military threat emanating from the Soviet Union ought to do now that this threat has disappeared. Should its primary purpose remain to defend the territory of its members against direct attack, which, though less likely, remains a possibility in an uncertain and unstable world? Alternatively, should the Alliance aim to extend security and stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic region, accepting new members that meet the basic standards of market democracy, the rule of law, and a commitment to resolve internal and external disputes by peaceful means? Or should NATO extend its reach both geographically and functionally, defending not just the common territory but also the common interests of the Alliance members wherever these might be threatened? Depending on how NATO's members answer these

fundamental questions about the Alliance's purpose, specific policy decision relating to its new strategic concept, its command and force structure arrangements, and the extent of its future enlargement will necessarily differ.

For nearly ten years, the Alliance has successfully avoided defining its future purpose, focusing instead on what immediate steps it should take to adapt to the new, post-cold war security environment. Internally, the Alliance has changed its command structure to enable the more flexible employment of NATO military capabilities – including by a subset of allies or even in concert with non-member countries. Contingency planning has shifted from defending against a massive conventional attack in central Europe to deploying military forces in support of a variety of peace operations – ranging from rescue and relief to peacekeeping and more ambitious peacemaking operations. Externally, NATO has opened its doors to new members and invited others to join its deliberations and councils. It has also shared its expertise in military planning, defense budgeting, and democratic control over armed forces with countries that were erstwhile members of the Warsaw Pact.

In concentrating on these internal and external adaptations, the Alliance has successfully demonstrated that it has a role to play in the new Europe – or at least that it can succeed in meeting the concerns or demands of the new era where other organizations could not. But without an underlying purpose, the nature and content of NATO's adaptation threatens to lose meaning and become change merely for change's sake. Its critics believe that the Alliance has been treading water, trying desperately to demonstrate that an organization that has lost its fundamental *raison d'être* with the disappearance of the Soviet Union remains relevant. To the extent it has succeeded in staying relevant, it has done so merely as a result of the incompetence of other organizations. For that reason, even its skeptics concede that NATO may well stay around for a while. For them, the Alliance is like a large corporation, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, but surviving because of the weakness of its competitors.¹

While the argument of NATO's doubters that the Alliance has no purpose in the new Europe and that the organization built up painstakingly during 40 years of cold war conflict and ten additional years of post-cold war adaptation is little more than an empty shell is wrong, the

contention that NATO has yet to define its essential purpose in the new Europe is surely right. As the allies consider the details of specific policy decisions – not least the nature and scope of the Alliance’s new strategic concept and the extent of its open-door commitment to enlargement – it is increasingly clear that for meaningful decisions to be made on these matters, the issues of the Alliance’s purpose in the next century must first be resolved. After all, it is that purpose that ought to define the military missions and operations for which NATO should to prepare itself and which, in turn, should determine the forces and other military capabilities the members need to deploy and acquire. It is that purpose, moreover, that will determine whether the Alliance should continue to enlarge its membership and, if so, what political, military, and other criteria will guide the process of selecting new members. It is that purpose, finally, that can demonstrate NATO’s lasting relevance in the new Europe as an organization that is able to meet the challenges and exploit the opportunities that the 21st century has to offer.

The issue of NATO’s future purpose is discussed in detail below. Three competing visions of the Alliance’s purpose are examined. The first vision is for NATO to remain narrowly focused on collective defense. The second vision is to transform NATO into Europe’s collective security organization, guaranteeing security not only for its current and prospective members but for all countries in the Euro-Atlantic area. Finally, the third vision is to extend NATO’s reach both functionally and geographically beyond Europe by turning it into the instrument of choice to defend against threats to European and American interests, wherever these might be threatened. Since none of these visions is likely to garner Alliance-wide support, I argue that NATO’s future purpose must be to extend security and stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic area by, first, holding the prospect of future membership open to those European states that both want to join and meet the essential political and military criteria of membership and, second, enforcing the rules, norms, and codes of conduct that govern relations within and between states in the region. At the same time, the Alliance’s integrated and increasingly flexible command structure, the interoperability of its forces, and the habit of cooperative defense and contingency planning provides its members with a unique foundation for joint military actions, be it to defend Alliance territory, enforce European rules and norms, or defeat threats to the common interests of some or all NATO members.

During the cold war years, NATO was a military alliance with a political foundation. It united a community of countries that, in the main, was committed to upholding the principles of democracy and individual liberty and sought to deter and, if necessary, defend against a possible attack by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. The principal conclusion of this essay is that the Alliance needs to reverse priorities – NATO must be a political alliance with a military foundation. Its principal purpose must be to enlarge the community of democratic states throughout the Euro-Atlantic area while providing its growing number of members with the military foundation to undertake joint military action in defense of their common territory, values, and interests. It is on the basis of an agreed purpose of the Alliance in the 21st century that specific policy issues can be addressed, including questions relating to NATO's new strategic concept and its policy toward future enlargement of its membership. These issues are addressed in the remainder of this essay.

NOTES

ⁱ See Josef Joffe, "Is there Life After Victory? What NATO Can and Cannot Do," *National Interest*, vol. 41 (Fall 1992); Stephen Walt, "The Precarious Partnership" American and Europe in a New Era," in Charles A. Kupchan, ed., *Atlantic Security: Contending Visions* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press), pp. 5-44; and Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1997), pp. 80-84.