CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

NATO's Evolving Role and Missions

Stanley R. Sloan, Senior Specialist in International Security Policy
with the assistance of J. Michelle Forrest
Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division

Summary

One of the key issues in the debate on NATO enlargement is the question of NATO's purpose and mission. This analysis suggests some possible answers to the question "What is NATO?" The answers are based on an interpretation of the North Atlantic Treaty, the observation that an organization is defined by its activities, and the declared objectives and intentions of its members. From this view, NATO clearly remains a collective defense pact in which the members pledge to take steps to assist another member that comes under attack. But under current threat circumstances that commitment no longer dominates NATO's day-to-day agenda. The Treaty also suggests that NATO is a community of values and common goals in support of "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law," which may help explain why NATO has survived the end of the Cold War. Today, the members have moved beyond the collective defense commitment to employ NATO's strengths as a defense cooperation organization for additional purposes. These purposes include creating political/military options for dealing with crises and challenges to the interests of the member states, spreading stability to Central and Eastern Europe, and encouraging cooperation with Russia and other countries. NATO is not a system of collective security, because it is not designed to resolve disputes among its members, but its activities contribute to collective security and make it a key part of an emerging Euro-Atlantic system of cooperative security.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Today, nearly a decade after the Berlin Wall fell, there are many diverse views about what NATO is or should become. The discussion of NATO's essence recalls the Indian fable about the King who asked a group of blind men to feel various parts of an elephant and to describe the elephant based on the part they had touched. Naturally, each blind man produced a different description of the elephant. This analysis starts from the premise that an objective assessment of NATO's purpose and mission can be based on several sources: on the provisions of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty; on the fact that an organization is in many respects defined by its activities; and on the declared goals and intentions of its members.

NATO as a Community of Values

The North Atlantic Treaty, otherwise known as the "Treaty of Washington of 1949" for the fact that it was signed in Washington on April 4, 1949, was clearly designed to counter Soviet expansion and military power. But the Treaty itself identified no enemy, protected the sovereign decisionmaking rights of all members, and was written in sufficiently flexible language to facilitate adjustments to accommodate changing international circumstances. Secretary of State Dean Acheson argued that "The central idea of the treaty is not a static one..." and that "the North Atlantic Treaty is far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common." During 1949 Senate hearings on the Treaty, Acheson and other Administration witnesses argued that what they were proposing was very different from previous military alliance systems.[1]

The North Atlantic Treaty would not have been signed in the absence of a Soviet threat. But what made NATO different from previous military alliances was that it was based on the Treaty's clearly articulated support for "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." A value basis for the alliance was necessary to help overcome forces in the United States which might have successfully resisted U.S. participation in a purely military alliance. It is true that, during the Cold War, the values of democracy, rule of law and individual freedom occasionally took second place when authoritarian regimes in NATO were tolerated in the interest of maintaining a militarily strong alliance. But NATO's survival beyond the end of the Cold War suggests that its value foundation remains an important part of the glue that holds the Alliance together and attracts new members.

NATO as a Flexible Framework

The Treaty, drafted in relatively simple language, does not spell out in great detail how its objectives should be implemented. There is no specified military strategy, no requirement for any particular set of bureaucratic arrangements or military organization, beyond the creation of a North Atlantic Council and a defense committee, both called for in Article 9. This suggests substantial latitude for reform or elimination of bureaucratic and military structures, or creation of new cooperative arrangements. The only limits on such changes are imposed by national interests, inertia, and other human and institutional factors, not by the Treaty.

NATO's flexibility has been demonstrated, for example, by the military buildup and elaboration of an integrated command structure in the early 1950s (which had not been anticipated when the Treaty was signed and was judged necessary only after North Korea invaded the South) and the adjustment to the failure of the European Defense Community (EDC) in 1954. In the mid-1960s, NATO was forced to adjust to France's departure from the Integrated Command Structure. At the same time, the Allies revamped NATO's strategy with the doctrine of "flexible response" to a possible Warsaw Pact attack. In 1967, the Allies approved the "Harmel Report," which gave the alliance the mission of

---

[1] North Atlantic Treaty, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, April 27, 28, 29, May 2, and 3, 1949.

promoting détente as well as sustaining deterrence and defense. In the 1990s, the Allies have been adapting NATO's structure and missions to new international conditions.

NATO as a Collective Defense System

At its founding, the most prominent aspect of the Treaty was its requirement for individual and collective actions for defense against armed attack. Article III of the Treaty provides that the Allies "separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." In Article V, the Treaty's collective defense provision, the Parties agreed that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all..." They agreed that each Party to the Treaty would "assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

The Article V provision is frequently described as requiring an "automatic" response by the United States to hostilities in Europe. The term "automatic" is inconsistent with a strict interpretation of Article V, which leaves the precise actions taken by each Party subject to their sovereign decision, and this was the interpretation of those who supported Treaty ratification in 1949. In the case of the United States, a decision to go to war to help defend a NATO country against attack would still require decisions taken within the constitutional framework involving congressional as well as Presidential decisions.

During the Cold War, NATO's strategy and the way in which the United States deployed its forces in Europe gave Article V more substance in practice than suggested by the words in the Treaty. Beginning in the early 1950s, the United States deployed its military forces and nuclear weapons forward in Europe, mainly in Germany, in a fashion that ensured a Soviet attack on the West would in its early stages engage U.S. forces, therefore constituting an attack on the United States as well as on the host nation. In the mid-1950s, the United States threatened "massive [nuclear] retaliation" against the Soviet Union should it attack a NATO country. After massive retaliation's credibility was undermined by Soviet acquisition of long-range nuclear weapons, NATO adopted a strategy of "flexible response" which suggested that battlefield nuclear weapons might be used early in any European conflict.   Such weapons were deployed well forward in West Germany to ensure that they were seen as part of NATO's first line of defense.

Today, with no imminent, Soviet-style threat, NATO strategy and force deployments have fundamentally altered the circumstances under which the United States would be making decisions on the use of its conventional and, especially, its nuclear forces in Europe. During the Cold War, the nuclear umbrella was designed to appear likely to be forced open in the case of a Warsaw Pact attack -- prudent Soviet leaders had to assume that nuclear weapons might well be used early in a European conflict. Today, the nuclear umbrella is much less automatic. The Allies have promised Russia that neither substantial NATO forces nor nuclear weapons would be deployed forward in new member states. The United States has withdrawn all of its militarily significant nuclear weapons from their forward deployments in Europe.

All this indicates that, although the words of Article V have not changed, the threat that might invoke the Article and the Alliance strategy and deployments in response have

changed quite radically. Now, the activities of the Alliance have turned toward purposes of defense cooperation that lie beyond collective defense.

NATO as a Cooperative Defense Organization

NATO has been and always will be a political as well as a military Alliance. In recent years, it has been popular to say that NATO would have to adapt to new circumstances by becoming "more political." But NATO's activities today illustrate its unique utility as an instrument to promote and implement political/military cooperation among member and partner states. The goals of such cooperation today, however, are substantially different than during the Cold War.

Policy Options for Crisis Management. In the early 1950s, the NATO countries developed a civilian organization and an integrated military command structure to help manage the Alliance and to establish that there would be a united front in response to any Warsaw Pact attack. At the end of the Cold War, the Allies asked themselves if they still needed such a system at a time when the Soviet threat had all but vanished. Their answer, in the 1991 "New Strategic Concept," was that defense cooperation, so essential in the Cold War, could be turned to other purposes. Since that time, most of NATO's military activities have been focused on "non-Article V" requirements, most significantly in Bosnia.[2] NATO cooperation is widely accepted as having facilitated an effective U.S.-led coalition response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

NATO remains an organization of sovereign nation states, and no member can be compelled to participate in a military operation that it does not support. Defense cooperation therefore cannot guarantee that the Allies will respond to any given political or military challenge. But NATO can be used to build political consensus and create military options to back up or implement political goals. U.S. and allied policymakers would have fewer credible coalition military options if their military leaders and forces were not working together on a day-to-day basis, developing interoperability of those forces, planning for contingency operations, and exercising their military capabilities. This day-to-day work develops habits of cooperation, at the political and military level, which underpin the ability to work together when required to do so under pressure or, more importantly, under fire.

Defense Cooperation as an Instrument of Political Change. Beyond this explanation of NATO as a mechanism for building multinational military coalitions, defense cooperation is now being used for political goals as well. Perhaps most importantly, political/military cooperation in NATO helps prevent "renationalization" of defense in Europe. The Partnership for Peace, premised initially on the development of individual defense cooperation arrangements with partner countries in Europe, has begun to weave the military systems of new democracies into the web of NATO cooperation.[3] Through the Partnership, countries have been learning how to develop systems of

---

[2] For background on the process of NATO adaptation see CRS Report 95-979 S, *NATO's Future: Beyond Collective Defense* by Stanley R. Sloan. September 15, 1995.

[3] See CRS Report 97-531, *NATO: Alliance Expansion, Partnership for Peace, and U.S. Security Assistance,* by Richard F. Grimmett, Paul E. Gallis, and Larry Nowels. May 9, 1997, and CRS Report 94-351, *Partnership for Peace*, by Paul E. Gallis, August 9, 1994.

democratically-controlled security establishments as well as habits of cooperation with NATO nations and neighboring partners. The partnership approach has helped the first wave of candidates meet the requirements for NATO membership.

In the face of Russian opposition to NATO enlargement, the Allies are attempting to use political/military cooperation with Russia as a means to change Russian perceptions of the Alliance and, it is hoped, to change the political relationship between Russia and NATO. In a sense, the Allies are updating the goal of using NATO to promote improved relations among states in Europe which was added to NATO's mission by the 1967 Harmel Report. If NATO succeeds, the defense cooperation relationship with Russia, which began with military cooperation in Bosnia and now is developing in the framework of the Russia-NATO Founding Act, could leap-frog over the arms control accords that were designed during the Cold War to regulate relationships between parties which otherwise were in conflict with one another. Moving from a Russia-NATO relationship governed by arms control to one characterized by the transparent, predictable and confidence-building nature of defense cooperation would mark a sea-change in the European security system.

Other Agendas

It is clear that NATO serves a variety of purposes for individual member states beyond these broadly stated goals. Many such "secondary" agendas help explain why current members of NATO want the Alliance to continue, and why so many countries want to join. For example, former members of the Warsaw Pact do not fear attack from today's Russia, but they see NATO as a guarantee against falling once again into the Russian sphere of influence as well as an insurance policy against any future resurgence of a Russian threat. Most European governments hope that the process of European unification will lead to more intensive security and defense cooperation. But they recognize that integration of European defense and foreign policies faces many obstacles. This is an evolutionary process that might require several more decades before Europe could become a unitary actor on the world stage. In the foreseeable future, most European Allies see the transatlantic link as essential to security in and around Europe, even though they support the development of a stronger European role in NATO.

Further, many Europeans believe that the U.S. role in Europe, particularly as translated through NATO, provides an important ingredient of stability that facilitates cooperation among European states. For example, even though Germany is not seen as a threat by its neighbors, both Germany and its neighbors feel more comfortable with Germany's role in Europe thoroughly integrated within the framework of both the European Union and the transatlantic Alliance. From the U.S. point of view, NATO can be regarded as a way to help ensure that the burdens of maintaining international stability are fairly shared.

Is NATO a Collective Security Organization?

The term "collective security" is widely and loosely used in the discussion of NATO's future role. According to its classic definition, "collective security" is a system of relations among states designed to maintain a balance of power and interests among the members that ensure peaceful relationships within that system. The League of Nations,

established after World War I without U.S. participation, is usually regarded as such a system.

NATO has always been designed as a system of cooperation among member states to deal with challenges and problems originating *outside* that system, not within it. Granted, NATO has to some extent tried to promote peaceful settlement of problems within the system, in support of its mission of defending against external threats. It is credited with having helped heal World War II wounds inflicted by Nazi Germany on its neighbors. NATO has also attempted to mitigate conflicts between Greece and Turkey. But when the Allies began preparing for enlargement, they made clear to potential applicants that they should resolve differences with their neighbors *before* they could be seriously considered for NATO membership.

From a legal perspective, NATO does not have principal responsibility for collective security in Europe -- the North Atlantic Treaty does not suggest such a role. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was designed to promote peaceful relations among states "from the Atlantic to the Urals." The 1975 Helsinki Final Act established a series of agreed principles ("rules of the road") to govern relations among states in Europe. The OSCE members states (all European states plus the United States and Canada) have adopted further agreements and principles, given the organization some diplomatic tools for conflict prevention, and convene regular meetings under OSCE auspices to try to nip problems in the bud before they develop more serious proportions. If a Euro-Atlantic cooperative security system develops, the OSCE could well serve as the "constitution" and collective security framework for that system.

It should, however, be acknowledged that several aspects of NATO's activities contribute to the goal of collective security. The Russia-NATO Founding Act, the Partnership for Peace, and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, for example, make important contributions to the goal of maintaining peaceful and cooperative relations among all states in Europe.

What Is NATO?

In sum, the collective defense commitment in the North Atlantic Treaty is an obligation taken on by all members, even though Article V leaves much room for nations to decide collectively and individually what to do under any given crisis scenario. Continuing defense cooperation in NATO keeps alive the potential to mount collective responses to aggression against Alliance members. Defense cooperation also creates policy options, though no obligation, for responses to crises beyond NATO's borders and serves as a tool for changing political relationships between NATO countries and other nations, particularly Russia. NATO is not a collective security organization; it is not designed to keep peace *among* its members but rather to protect and advance the interests of the members in dealing with the world around them. But some of NATO's activities contribute to the goal of collective security. To many, the North Atlantic Treaty represents the values and goals articulated by the United States and its Allies today. However, at this time of rapid change, issues of direction and mission are engaging the attention of policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Viewing the entire NATO "elephant" today, the Alliance appears to be: a transatlantic community of values; a collective defense system; a system for defense cooperation; and a key part of an emerging cooperative Euro-Atlantic security system.