

NATO is dead: long live NATO!

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bauer, T. (2009). *NATO is dead: long live NATO!* (CAPerspectives, 2/2009). München: Universität München, Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung (C.A.P). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-421279>

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Thomas Bauer

NATO is dead – Long live NATO!

With the 60th Anniversary of the alliance at hand, its fate seems to be more uncertain and unpredictable than ever. While some commentaries already foresee the end of NATO, there are others that rather portray a revitalization of the old transatlantic alliance due to the new US-administration and the return of France into NATO's military command structures. But people tend to look too closely at NATO's institutional and conceptual framework and the future risks it is – at least theoretically – intended to counter. Instead, one should focus on the member states and their relationship with other parties, because it is the capitols that define the framework for NATO's political and military action.

The various scenarios and forecasts for the future of NATO come at a time when the alliance is undeniably facing the most complex and ambitious set of tasks in its history. At the same time the debates and constraints within the alliance concerning a revised strategic concept for the alliance or how to lead the Afghanistan mission to an end are producing more and more irritation. This irritation usually provokes a look back into history to the supposed good old days, when everything seemed to be so much easier and more predictable. Especially since the transatlantic and intra-European dispute over the Iraq war in 2003, commentators like to refer to the alleged greater efficiency of NATO during the cold-war era. Reality, of course, looks different, and it is especially in the year of the 60th anniversary that we all should become aware again of how dramatically NATO has changed during the last six decades in order to understand that adaptation to the strategic reality without letting the basic principles out of sight is the best way for survival. There never was only one version of the cold-war NATO, and there never was a time without internal constraints or disputes. The 1967 Harmel-Report, which provided more flexibility than the previous concept of massive disenchantment, was not a result of pure harmony within the alliance, nor was the NATO-Double-Track decision in the late 1980s favoured by everybody. The latter came only into being after severe discussion between European leaders like German chancellor Helmut Schmidt and US-President Jimmy Carter. The decision to start the so-called out-of-area operations at the beginning of the 1990s was just as heavily debated as the idea of a more autonomous European Security and Defence

Identity (ESDI) within the alliance. Recalling the dramatic changes in the geostrategic environment since the late 1940s, it is clear that NATO never saw easy times. In fact, that is why NATO even exists in the first place, because if it had been easy times there would have been no demand for an organisation like it.

The current debate concerning the strategic irrelevance of the alliance, the lack of political leadership within NATO, and the gap between ambitions and reality on the ground touches another important issue. Despite the installation of a NATO secretary-general, there does not exist this single person who has to take the responsibility for action. It is the

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members of NATO that make up its assets, its capacities, its capabilities, and its effects on the international level. Without the political will of these states to commit themselves there can't be any future for NATO. Without these states there won't be any solution to any

kind of problem the alliance is facing. NATO is made up of 26 individual and sovereign states. This means it is made up of 26 different armed services, 26 different state leaders, 26 different histories and cultural characteristic, 26 different public opinions and 26 different election-schedules and domestic political agendas. And here comes the surprise: Despite a lower number of member states, this multi-faceted construction that makes consensus so difficult has been there since 1949 and even prior to that. The Brussels Treaty of 1948, signed by France, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg, was directed against Germany and the Soviet Union. But the five founding states would have answered

differently if they had been asked which of the two they feared the most. Alliances and organisations such as NATO or the European Community for Coal and Steel were not set up because the founding nations were best friends, but because they shared a set of common interests that were more important than the economic, political, or cultural differences. Over the years we forgot to see the differences between us, and we began to neglect that these differences influence us in our behaviour and our decisions. Even worse, we think this variety of opinions is a sign of weakness, that it is something 60 years of partnership should have helped to erase. But the truth is, it is this heterogeneity that provides the ground for common solutions, because without it there wouldn't be the necessity to find the compromise, there wouldn't be the continuing exchange of ideas and views, and there wouldn't be the agreement that some challenges demand common commitment despite differences in other areas of interest. The first chancellor of the German Empire, Count Otto von Bismarck, based his *Realpolitik* on this simple analysis: States don't have friends; states have interests. Europe as well as the transatlantic partnership were, and still are, communities of interests. That is why we decided to join and to cooperate after the Second World War, and this is why we still need to cooperate today. No Mr. NATO will find a satisfying solution for Afghanistan; it is the 26 sovereign states that have to combine their efforts to form effective engagement.

Several briefing books and reports have been published during the recent months, providing a broad picture of the challenges and risks that demand further international commitment. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, security of energy supply, and a rising threat of piracy on the major supply routes to Europe are but some of them. Risks cause certain effects on our society, economy, and sovereignty. What we need to define are the counter-effects and the assets that drive the capabilities we need for implementing the necessary steps. But instead of looking at the specific technical, political, financial, or military details of the various issues, NATO should first concentrate on the barriers that limit potential effects of measures at hand. Changes cannot be forced through institutional changes or the focus on NATO structures and

command posts, but are rather promoted through dialogue between the relevant internal and external partners. In this sense some of the more urgent issues can be summarized and put under more general tasks. Three of them seem to be the most promising areas for future initiatives, and should therefore get a prominent place on the agenda of the upcoming NATO meeting in Kehl/Strasbourg: Dialogue and cooperation with Russia, the issue of NATO-enlargement, and the relationship between the United States and the European Union.

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1. Closer cooperation with Russia: Missile Defence, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, the Black Sea area and NATO's potential enlargement into that region, as well as the dispute with Iran over its nuclear program circle around one major issue: The strategic dialogue with Russia.

Some NATO members still refer to Moscow as a potential enemy. But Russia is the most important external partner NATO needs for promoting any additional political steps. This is true for both the positive approaches, like global proliferation treaties, control regimes, and strategic arms reduction as well as the negative measures such as sanctions or blockades up to disarmaments operations. Undeniably, Moscow follows a different economic approach concerning its role in terms of energy security and climate change. Therefore, the West needs to respond to Moscow on a case-by-case basis and – like Bobo Lo from the London-based CER calls it – exercise strategic patience. The most important actors on NATO's side for a revitalization of NATO-Russia cooperation are the United States and Germany. While the former needs to redefine its strategic relationship with the once super-power and leave the revived cold-war rhetoric of recent years behind, the latter has to operate as the mediator between those states that wish to cooperate more closely with Moscow and those that still see a necessity to defend themselves against Moscow.

2. Enlargement of NATO and the EU to the East and Southeast: This issue is closely connected to Russia's relationship to and influence on states within the old area of Soviet influence. Any attempt in recent years that brought NATO closer to the Russian border has led to diplomatic constraints and mistrust.

The question whether Georgia and the Ukraine should be offered the Membership Action Plan (MAP) has provoked direct opposition from Moscow. Consequently, there is a need for closer cooperation that does not automatically lead to full membership like the MAP does. Especially concerning the Black Sea region NATO should face reality and stop its promotion of MAP to states in the area and work more closely with Russia on defining a new security architecture for the whole of Europe, from the Atlantic to the Ural. This of course also touches the issue of Turkey and its ambitions to become a member of the European Union. The current dispute concerning the possible nomination of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as successor of Jaap de Hoop Schaeffer in his position as NATO secretary-general underlines the interdependence of EU- and NATO-enlargement. Turkey is blocking any NATO-EU cooperation under the Berlin-plus arrangements, and its dissatisfaction with the accession-process to the European Union also causes damage to NATO. Providing Turkey with an option for closer cooperation with the EU below the level of full membership could help end Ankara's blockade against NATO-EU cooperation, and create a more credible and strategic partner for both NATO and the EU in the Black Sea region. This could help to establish the multilayered security architecture in the area, integrating the United States through NATO and closer US-Russian cooperation. More flexibility on the issue of enlargement and accession to NATO could also prove to be important for those European countries that are not member of NATO, e.g. Austria. These states now face a strategic dilemma after France's returning to NATO's military command structure, because an ESDP approach towards security and defence in and for Europe alone is – if it ever was – no longer realistic. The need for multilateral cooperation has become eminent. A solution to closer cooperation without integration into NATO could help them to step ahead.

3. US-EU co-operation: The two prior issues cannot be solved without a redefinition of the relationship between the two tiers of NATO, the United States and Europe. Especially the co-operation between the US and the European Union needs to be put on a higher level. As long as the EU-US relations are dominated by economic and trade issues the strategic relevance of their security cooperation for NATO will be undermined by the discussions about burden-sharing. But it is those never-ending discussions about political hierarchy, the role of civil and military means for stability, and the apparent dominance of either side's approach to security over the other's that block any progress for closer US-European co-operation. This is not only a problem for NATO but also for the United Nations and the work within the Security Council. Therefore, the annual EU-US summits should be enhanced to a broader strategic dialogue forum, intended to identify common interests and to support common risk awareness, paving the way for more effective NATO and EU cooperation.

As unspectacular as these proposals may sound, as important are they for understanding and solving the true nature of the current NATO crisis: A lack of political dialogue driven by pragmatism and the need for effectiveness instead of ideological debates from the past or wishful thinking approaches directed at NATO becoming a full-spectrum, all-in-one player. NATO's future role cannot be found in the technical discussion about climate change but in the debates about how to approach the relevant actors, how to integrate them into multilateral and multifaceted initiatives, and how to sustain against both over-excited expectations and ill-tempered doomsday scenarios.

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