Essay

A Matter of Perspective: Why Predictions of NATO's Demise are Flawed.

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Abstract

There has been much written on the current state of NATO and many debates about whether it is facing demise. There are numerous issues facing NATO, but also a possible overestimation of the extent of NATO's problems. There exists the possibility that NATO can respond to challenges effectively, a concept which this paper will explore.

Keywords: NATO, demise, problem solver.

Introduction: NATO's Long 'Ending'

As NATO's Libya campaign publicised divisions within the alliance yet again, there was the inevitable round of handwringing about this being NATO's Waterloo (Metz, 2011; Kaplan, 2011). In a popular version of the story, unequal burden sharing between the dissimilarly armed allies, combined with an inability to reach consensus, strained the alliance to breaking point (Myers and Dempsey, 2011). The cause, or at least exacerbation, of these problems is often deemed to be NATO's eastern expansion after the Cold War. In variations of the story, the end of the Cold War itself ended NATO's raison d'etre, and expansion has simply been a desperate stalling tactic for an organisation destined to end (Rynning, 2005).

As Wallace Thies notes in his book, *Why NATO Endures* (2009), these perpetual arguments continue to be wrong and almost uniformly make two key errors. The first is in their assigned causes for observed strife within NATO, of which expansion is the latest suspect. The second is in examining expansion as a cause, rather than an effect, of an evolving post-Cold War NATO. These

flaws in perspective lead to the repeated conclusion that NATO is dying, and thus shower us with the latest round of doomsayers.

Luckily, recent authors like Thies have been critically examining these claims and providing a clearer picture of the actual state of NATO. This new scholarship illustrates three main points; firstly, that pessimistic predictions arise from a flawed interpretation of NATO and its expansion policy; secondly, that these interpretations are the result of using theoretical lenses inappropriate to the case of NATO; thirdly, that using more appropriate theoretical perspectives can illuminate the true issues, of which there are many, facing NATO, and provide insight into how to deal with them. The new scholarship suggests that NATO still faces great challenges, but in contrast to the popular narrative, they demonstrate that rumours of NATO's demise in Libya, as has been the case on many other occasions, have been greatly exaggerated.

Cause and Effect: NATO's Problems and Their Origin

The two main issues presented by critics as irreconcilable problems for NATO are the burden sharing debate - various cases of grossly unequal distribution of force capacity across the alliance - and the diverging interests and discord that emerge between member states. In one view, NATO's eastward expansion, and into non-European concerns, expands the alliance's mandate without adding credible allies to share in this increased burden. With the alliance ballooning to 28 members, the chances of consensus are greatly reduced as well (Kamp, 1995).

This is a compelling story but does not fit the facts. Disagreement between the member states has been present since the beginning and no state at present is close to leaving the alliance, like France did in 1965, when the Cold War was raging and the supposedly tight-knit group was holding together (Kaplan, 2008). Similarly, arguments about burden sharing are real, but predate post-Cold War expansion by several years. For instance, there was considerable debate among NATO allies along with France about who should take responsibility for the crisis in Lebanon in the early 1980s (Forster and Cimbala, 2005). A paper from that time notes that few could even agree on what the definition of burden sharing was and it was already accepted that U.S. military power was a necessary driving force behind the alliance (Lunn, 1983).

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Similarly, the argument that the threat from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was strong enough to paper over these differences does not hold water. It is essentially a security argument, but as mentioned, France left the alliance at the height of Cold War tensions and has since rejoined when the alliance's focus is moving beyond collective security. Even though the recent Strategic Concept continued to list collective defence near the top, it is now joined by a plethora of other concerns that were previously non existent. From a security standpoint, the focus is undoubtedly weaker, and the introduction of the common threat of Islamic terrorism has led to some of the deepest dividing lines in NATO history, rather than solidarity (Lindley-French, 2007).

Clearly, NATO's problems cannot be laid at the doorstep of this issue. Instead, one needs to look at the vast expansion of NATO responsibilities and missions since the beginning of the 1990s separately from the end of the Cold War and the alliance's expanding membership and mandate. The first 'new' style operation headed by NATO allies, the Persian Gulf crisis, occurred even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It foreshadowed many of the 'out of area', in regards to the original European mandate, operations that would follow, both under the NATO banner and involving significant members (Forster and Cimbala, 2005). Similarly, involvements in the Balkan conflicts, which have in some ways underlined the post-Cold War NATO mission, grew out of an evolving understanding of the responsibilities and mandates of the alliance. This began with the introduction of the New Strategic Concept in 1991 (Moore, 2007). These operations, and those that followed in kind, have indeed presented numerous problems for the alliance, but are largely unconnected to the expansion of membership in Eastern Europe; other than that they are different prongs of the same evolving strategy.

This strategy has unquestionably been affected by the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc, but as the timing of events shows, the Strategic Concept was evolving even before the Cold War was finished, and not in response to a need to refocus or justify its existence, as many critics claim. In many ways, the missions have chosen NATO, rather than the other way around and attributing cause to expanding membership as an exacerbation of the problems of adjustment is to falsely picture concurrent events as causal.

To fully pick up on this distinction though, we must correctly define NATO and the theoretical lens through which to view it. The expansion of the Strategic Concept and membership indeed seems absurd when viewed through a purely military and power balancing context, which is natural

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when an organisation describes itself as an alliance (Rynning, 2005). But as recent writers have shown, this may not be the best way to analyse NATO's actions and with a refocused theoretical basis they are in a better position to analyse the origin and nature of NATO's strategy and challenges.

NATO as International Institution

Sten Rynning observes in the opening of his book, *NATO Renewed* (2005), that the majority of pessimistic voices in the debate over NATO's future come from realists. With their view that power politics is the defining characteristic of international relations, it is unsurprising that many prominent realists, such as John Mearshimer, argued that without the counterbalancing force of the Warsaw Pact, NATO would vanish. Another major voice from the realist camp, Kenneth Waltz, saw the post-Cold War expansion of NATO as a resetting of the global power distribution from bipolar to unipolar; this 'made sense in the short term' but would similarly result in the dissolution of the organisation. Both claims have been largely laid to rest; NATO may indeed collapse one day, but 20 years on, it has outlasted this reasoning. Still, with realism maintaining its spot as the dominant paradigm in the international relations field, such arguments continue to be made during NATO's moments of crisis.

Thies's *Why NATO Endures* looks closer at these 'crisis' claims and concludes they arise from a misreading of NATO as a traditional defence alliance. He argues it goes beyond the historical definition of an alliance and that NATO operates more like an international regime or regional organisation. He notes that historically, alliances do succumb to difference among members but that NATO has repeatedly withstood large disagreements that would have terminated other pacts. Thies attributes this to NATO being built upon stronger, more political relationships and the disagreements being on largely political and policy issues, rather than a struggle for power within the group (2009).

In many ways NATO functions as the archetypal liberal institution, as postulated by Robert Keohane in his seminal *After Hegemony* (1984). It has relied, and continues to rely, on the hegemonic power of the United States, but has transcended its original defence function to provide political benefits, most notably information sharing (Rynning, 2005). The U.S. in recent years has

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used this component to retain its voice in European affairs, perceiving that operations flowing through NATO allow it to remain part of the dialogue (Lindley-French, 2007). This is potentially also a reason for the U.S.'s insistence on using the NATO framework in Libya. Rebecca Moore, in her book *NATO's New Mission* (2007), identified this element of information and normative sharing as a large part of NATO's eastward expansion, bringing post-Soviet states into the 'liberal democratic' community. In her reading, also reflected in the views of Moore's colleagues, NATO's expanding membership is not a weakness, a desperate search for reason, but a strength and confirmation that the organisation is built upon far more than collective defence.

Moore expanded upon this institutionalist view in a recent piece (2010) about the 2006 Riga summit and NATO's relationship with non-member states. Alongside the theoretical framework, Moore documented comments of major NATO officials, which bolster the argument that the major players are also viewing NATO through this lens, rather than as a purely defensive alliance. Specifically, Richard Olson, deputy U.S. ambassador to NATO, suggested that the formalisation of partnerships, that took place at Riga, were connected to NATO's 1990s expansion and "reflect[ed] what in reality was already taking place on the ground". That is, NATO missions were defined by the political relationships the alliance built rather than by defensive calculations. Moore went even further in tackling the perceived problem of a 'two-tier NATO', arguing that multiple tiers of membership are befitting a more open and globalised organisation, much in the same way the UN has specialised committees.

Alongside this institutionalist school there has been work focusing on NATO's socialisation of member states, like Alexandra Gheciu's *NATO in the "New Europe"* (2005). This socialisation theory emphasises NATO's ability as an international regime to disseminate liberal democratic norms and mitigate conflict between members. Indeed, Gheciu argues that NATO's eastern expansion has primarily been successful in socialising the post-Communist states to western political and economic norms. She also views the debates between NATO members as strengthening, in that NATO provides a normative forum where these policy debates can occur and help increase eventual cooperation. Hakan Akbulut studied this more closely in the case of the feud between Greece and Turkey's membership in the larger North Atlantic community, investigating whether membership helped stabilise relationships between them (2005). Although Akbulut found

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mixed evidence, both he (2005) and Rynning (2007) emphasised the coexistence of institutionalist and constructivist effects on NATO.

Still, despite their comparatively rosy outlook on realist concerns about NATO, we should be careful to not read this developing literature merely as a reaction. Each author sees a key period ahead for the organisation and their analysis has produced a wide array of policy recommendations. Though NATO may not be dying a realist death, Akbulut and Rynning reveal a challenging future for the alliance.

A New Look at NATO Challenges

Thies is perhaps most optimistic. Though he acknowledges divisive arguments on issues such as Iraq, he tends to find that such differences actually strengthen the bonds between NATO allies in the long run. Thies focuses on the inherent qualities of the liberal democracies that populate NATO as being reflected in the alliance itself, namely strong institutions that can withstand and even foster debate and disagreement. He also notes that this factor of democracy makes the core NATO allies more ideologically similar than most historical military alliances. Though there is strong disagreement on certain issues, they do not group multiple issues along strong 'party' lines to create enduring rivalries. Each 'crisis', as Thies sees it, is a separate entity (1995).

Like Moore, Thies views the uneven power distribution within the alliance as a good thing because it encourages members to contribute as they jockey for influence and position (1995). This could be used to explain the debates that played out over Libya, as Britain and France's hawkish positions may have been designed to bolster their power credentials within both NATO and the European community - not to mention with their leaders' domestic audiences (Ash, 2011). In this view, coordination and implementation are the biggest concerns, as whatever dividing lines are drawn over Libya will inevitably be redrawn on the next issue. This idea holds true for Germany as well, which steadfastly opposed the Libya mission but recently committed more troops to NATO's mission in Afghanistan (Donahue, 2011).

Moore and Gülner Aybet, editing a new compilation of authors that challenge the realist take on NATO (2010), are less certain that the current divides are beneficial. Though they agree that the NATO framework has forged consensus in the long run, they argue that NATO must reconcile its

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Cold War justifications of collective defence with its new missions. A large part of this involves maintaining the sense of common purpose among the members. Contrary to Mearshimer, Moore and Aybet do not see this as a smokescreen for a lack of reasoning, but a need for clarity of commitment. This idea plays into their view of the 'two-tier' aspect of NATO operations, specifically in Afghanistan, which they do not condemn outright, but argue must be openly dealt with as part of an overall strategic framework. In tackling these issues, they also revisit the debates on expansion, writing that "the ongoing debate over NATO's global partners is ultimately a debate over NATO's very purpose and identity" (2010).

Alexandra Gheciu (2005), following her more constructivist framework, interprets that identity differently than most of the others. Gheciu concludes that rather than shifting mission and focus in the post-Cold War era, NATO has always been primarily about political cooperation and shared values. The change has come from the fall of a similarly strong ideological bloc in the Warsaw Pact, allowing NATO to open its doors without fear of being undermined. To her, NATO's biggest threat comes not from outside but from its own community, specifically the possibility of a stronger EU security presence making it redundant (2005). From this angle, NATO expansion appears necessary to distinguish the organisation from an increasingly integrated European community. However, these concerns are less urgent in light of EU defence policy setbacks (Rynning, 2007) and continued reliance on the military power of the U.S., who, as seen in Libya, still wants to run through a NATO framework and hold the political power to make this happen (Watt, 2011).

The issue of military power is a thorny one for these authors. Rynning (2007) claims that in repudiating realist focus on military power, as a source of NATO's decision-making and raison d'etre, we must not lose sight of its functional importance. Moore (2007) follows this line of reasoning, arguing that a lack of military coordination will impinge on NATO's ability to project its power, even when members come together politically. To Moore, this calls for a more strongly defined vision on how and when to use NATO power, but Rynning sees it as a reason to cede NATO's control of operations to coalitions within the alliance. He writes that "NATO must think of itself as an organization that sponsors operations but does not decide on them or control them" (2007). In this way, the political benefits of the alliance structure can be used without the heavy debates or the need for consensus on military action.

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These arguments, and many others, play into the idea that NATO is less of an alliance and more of an international body, which is deemed a good thing, and thus NATO should continue to evolve in such a direction. Stated bluntly, it seems a rather radical idea, but becomes less so when one notes how the issues NATO operations face track so closely with the problems identified in UN peacekeeping operations and other coalitions sponsored by regional organisations. Both have grown alongside each other in number and extensiveness since the Cold War and face similar issues, such as mission definition, 'creep' - concern over commitments and political will in undertaking operations - and unclear objectives and scenarios for terminating operations (Wright, 2011). Still, the idea that NATO should more closely hew to those lines, when UN operations have had well-documented problems of their own, is dubious. Instead, using that lens, NATO's actions should be evaluated on its unique responses to these similar issues.

NATO Today: Responding to Challenges

The initial place to look for NATO's approach is the recently updated Strategic Concept. It is perhaps the most expansive Strategic Concept in NATO history, in terms of the breadth of issues covered, but is lacking in specifics of how to implement policies on those issues. In this way, NATO indeed compares closely with UN resolutions on similar topics, in however an unfavourable way. Aybet (2010) feels that simply clarifying these many objectives can go a long way toward smoothing over political differences in the alliance, but as in the UN cases, specifics are the rub. The Strategic Concept may not be the place for them, but if it isn't, perhaps NATO should consider a wholly separate codifying of operational procedures, as the current ad hoc system induces inefficiencies and roadblocks that ultimately can jeopardise the use of the alliance.

In practice, especially in recent dealings with Afghanistan and Libya, the allies have emerged better, as the authors' analysis predict. Though the jury is still out on these operations, NATO has so far endured as an alliance, even through their troubling aspects. Whilst NATO continues to face recurring operational issues, this has not threatened the foundations of the organisation. Again, the devil has been in the details, not the overarching relationships.

Obviously, there are many more challenges, which have not been covered here, such as NATO's evolving relationship with Russia, its outdated bureaucracy, and the continued growing pains of

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expanding beyond its Euro-centric view. None should be understated, but this new wave of scholarship suggests that they should not be viewed as fatal either. It is not a question of NATO's existence, but its effectiveness and influence. To view expanding membership and mandate as a threat to NATO's survival is to miss the point. NATO is already global. It is up to its members to ensure it can function on that stage.

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