



UNDERSTANDING NATO

THE ORIGINS OF THE ALLIANCE

In the aftermath of the Second World War, East and West Europe found themselves separated by the ideological and political divisions of the Cold War. Eastern Europe fell under the domination of the Soviet Union. In 1949, twelve countries from both sides of the Atlantic formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to counter the risk that the Soviet Union would seek to extend its control of Eastern Europe to other parts of the continent.

Between 1947 and 1952, the Marshall Plan provided the means of stabilising Western European economies. NATO's role as a political and military alliance was to provide for collective defence against any form of aggression and to maintain a secure environment for the development of democracy and economic growth. In the words of the then US President Harry S Truman, the Marshall Plan and NATO were "two halves of the same walnut".

The founding members of NATO - Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States - committed themselves to come to each other's defence in the event of military aggression against any one of them. Accordingly, NATO member states increased their efforts to develop the military structures needed to implement their commitment to joint defence. Nevertheless, NATO remained a politically led organisation catering for the interests of all its members.

By binding North America to the defence of Western Europe, the Alliance would demonstrate that any attempt at political and military coercion against Western Europe would fail. Simultaneously, it would provide a framework for preventing the resurgence of militant nationalism in Europe.

In all these respects, the Alliance more than served its purpose. The presence of North American forces on European soil, at the request of European governments, helped to discourage any attempt to threaten or politically coerce allied countries. Moreover, as time passed, former adversaries became allies. In 1952 Greece and Turkey joined the Alliance, followed three years later by the Federal Republic of Germany, and in 1982 by Spain.

Through the Alliance, Western Europe and North America not only jointly defended their independence but also achieved an unprecedented level of stability. Indeed, the security provided by NATO has been described as the "oxygen of prosperity" which laid the basis for European economic cooperation and integration. It also paved the way for the end of the Cold War and of the division of Europe at the beginning of the 1990s.

RESHAPING THE ALLIANCE

During the Cold War, NATO's role and purpose were clearly defined by the existence of the threat posed by the Soviet Union. By the early 1990s, the Warsaw Pact had been dissolved at the insistence of the newly liberated countries of Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union had collapsed. With the disappearance of traditional adversaries, some commentators believed that the need for NATO had also been removed and that future defence expenditure and investment in armed forces should be dramatically reduced.

In spite of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, however, hopes for a peace dividend proved premature. It soon became apparent that although the end of the Cold War might have removed direct military threats, instability in some parts of Europe had increased. A number of regional conflicts, often fuelled by ethnic and religious tensions, broke out in the former Yugoslavia and in parts of the former Soviet Union and threatened to spread. NATO countries rapidly came to the conclusion that their commitment to collective defence and the cooperation achieved through NATO continued to provide the best guarantee for their security.

Moreover, although the prospect of military invasion might be negligible, new forms of political and military cooperation would be called for to deal with new challenges such as ethnic conflicts and to foster stability and security in the wider Europe.

With this goal in mind, NATO has, over the past decade, evolved from being exclusively a tightly knit alliance with responsibility for collective defence, to becoming the focus for a partnership of nations cooperating in the wider field of security. From 1990 onwards, regular contacts were established with former Warsaw Pact countries and newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union, firstly through the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which was since renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, and subsequently through the Partnership for Peace.

NATO also underwent a process of radical internal change to respond to Europe's new security situation. In particular, it began to transform its military structures and forces to enable it to undertake crisis management, peacekeeping and peace-support tasks in cooperation with its new Partner countries.

Well before this process was complete, the Alliance was in fact already undertaking military operations to monitor and enforce United Nations resolutions relating to the former Yugoslavia. With the signature of the Dayton Agreement which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, NATO then played a key role by establishing the Implementation Force (IFOR) and subsequently the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), in order to ensure that the agreement was implemented and to prepare a basis for future peace. A few years later, in 1999, the Alliance intervened in Kosovo by launching an air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in order to halt massive human rights' violations against the Kosovar Albanians and to prevent the spread of the conflict in the region.

NATO has also introduced a number of other initiatives to meet future security challenges. Among the most important of these are the Defence Capabilities Initiative (DCI); the development of the European Security and Defence Identity within the Alliance (ESDI); and the establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Centre, which seeks to improve the Alliance's ability to respond to the threat posed by such weapons and to prevent their spread.

The Defence Capabilities Initiative is designed to ensure that all Allies not only remain interoperable, but that they also improve and update their capabilities to face the new security challenges. Through DCI

Allies are focussing on those areas that are crucial for current and future operations, such as, the mobility of forces; their logistical support; and their command and control.

The purpose of strengthening the European side of the Alliance through ESDI is to enable the European Allies to assume greater responsibilities in the security and defence field. Drawing on NATO's assets and capabilities, the European Allies would be able to conduct operations in which the Alliance as a whole is not engaged militarily. Such operations might be conducted, for example, under the leadership of the European Union. Arrangements are currently being worked out between NATO and the European Union to make this possible. Strengthening the role played by the European countries will also result in a fairer distribution of the burdens and responsibilities of security between the two sides of the Atlantic, creating a more evenly balanced transatlantic relationship adapted to the needs of the 21st century.

HOW NATO WORKS

One of the keys to NATO's success is its decision-making process based on consensus. There is no system of voting and all decisions have to be unanimous. Extensive consultations and discussions are often required before an important decision can be taken. Although this system may appear slow and unwieldy to an outside observer, it has two major advantages; firstly, the sovereignty and independence of each member country is respected; and secondly, when a decision is reached, it has the full backing of all member countries and their commitment to implement it.

The most important decision-making body in NATO is the North Atlantic Council on which each member country is represented by a permanent representative with the rank of ambassador, supported by a national delegation consisting of diplomatic staff and advisers. The Council meets at ambassadorial level at least once a week. There are also regular meetings of the Council at the level of Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers and, from time to time, Heads of State and Government.

The North Atlantic Council has established many committees and planning groups to support its work. These bodies also meet at different levels, either at the political headquarters of NATO in Brussels or in different member countries.

NATO is headed by a Secretary General, who is appointed for approximately four years. He is a senior international statesman from one of the member countries. The Secretary General chairs meetings of the North Atlantic Council and other important NATO bodies and helps to build consensus among the member nations. In managing day-to-day activities of the Alliance, he is supported by an international staff.

NATO does not have independent armed forces of its own. Most forces available to NATO remain under full national command and control until they are assigned by the member countries to undertake tasks ranging from collective defence to new missions such as peacekeeping and peace-support. The role of NATO's political and military structures is to provide the political authority and joint military planning required to enable national forces to carry out these tasks as well as the organisational arrangements needed for their joint command, control, training and exercising.

BUILDING SECURITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

An important aim of NATO's transformation has been to strengthen security and stability by building confidence and understanding with its former adversaries through dialogue and cooperation. An early step in this direction was the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991. Since renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, this has become the principal forum for consultation and cooperation between NATO and non-member countries.

In 1994 NATO introduced the Partnership for Peace. This is a major programme designed to assist participating countries to restructure their armed forces to enable them to play their proper role in a democratic society. Tailored to the individual needs of each country, it offers opportunities for practical cooperation in many different fields, allowing participants to choose as much or as little from the programme as their security needs require. Activities range from military exercises and workshops to seminars and training courses. Particular emphasis is placed on making military forces more transparent and accountable to the electorate. The experience gained through Partnership for Peace has contributed significantly to the cooperation between the countries participating in peace-keeping forces such as the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kosovo Force (KFOR).

In 1997, NATO and Russia and NATO and Ukraine also placed their bilateral cooperation on a more formal basis. The NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council and the NATO-Ukraine Commission were established as a means of facilitating regular consultation and discussion of security matters. Topics discussed at these meetings range from peacekeeping in the Balkans, crisis management and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to defence conversion, environmental protection and civil emergency planning. Both countries along with other partner countries have participated in NATO peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1999, due to sharp differences over NATO's decision to act militarily in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo, the Russian Federation suspended its participation in the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. However, following the end of the crisis, Russia agreed to contribute forces to KFOR. Ukrainian forces have also contributed to KFOR. Cooperation and consultation between NATO and Russia in the framework of the Permanent Joint Council resumed in 2000.

NATO ENLARGEMENT

From the early 1990s, a number of Eastern European countries concluded that their future security interests could best be met by joining the North Atlantic Alliance and voiced their intention of seeking membership. Three former Partner countries - the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland - were invited to begin accession negotiations and in March 1999 became members, bringing the number of member countries to nineteen. NATO enlargement is designed to make Europe as a whole more secure and stable and does not represent a threat to any country. This was made clear by the commitment of the Alliance not to deploy any troops or nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members.

At the Washington summit meeting in April 1999, NATO leaders emphasised that the three new members would not be the last. Decisions on further membership invitations are expected at the summit meeting of the North Atlantic Council in 2002.

NATO governments have made clear throughout that the expansion of the Alliance is not an aim in itself but a means of extending NATO's security further afield. Accordingly, new members should not only enjoy the benefits of membership but should also be able to contribute to the overall security of all the member countries.

In 1999, NATO launched a Membership Action Plan to help interested Partner countries to prepare for membership. The plan draws on the experience of the three newest members in preparing to join the Alliance. It offers aspiring members practical advice and assistance through their individual Partnership for Peace programmes and focuses on membership-related issues. In turn, aspiring members are expected to meet certain political goals, including the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, respect for democratic procedures and the rule of law, and the democratic control of their armed forces. The plan does not offer any guarantee of future membership, but it does help countries to adapt their armed forces and to prepare for the obligations and responsibilities Alliance membership would bring.

INTO THE FUTURE

The transformation of NATO is not complete. It is an ongoing process of adaptation and reform, aimed at enabling NATO to deal effectively with new security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic area. Despite these continuing changes, however, NATO's core principles will remain the same: the principle that nations can only ensure their security by working together, and, above all, the principle that Europe and North America are a unique community of shared values and interests. Based on these fundamental principles, NATO will continue to play a key role as an effective crisis manager and as a solid framework for security cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic area.

This text is not a formally agreed NATO document and, therefore, does not necessarily represent the official views of individual member governments on all policy issues discussed.

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