The founding of NATO half a century ago coincided with my own first visit to the United States. From the start, I was deeply impressed by America’s vitality and its willingness to help, and that impression has stayed with me ever since. But for the Americans, and their political and military commitment to Europe, Stalin and Khrushchev might have subjugated the whole of the European continent. But for the Americans, the nations of the eastern half of Europe would never have had the chance to regain their freedom, nor would the Germans have had the chance to achieve reunification. All Europeans have a great many reasons to be grateful to the Atlantic Alliance and its American leadership.

Alliance solidarity

Of course, there is no denying that the Alliance has seen many internal conflicts of interest during its 50-year existence. It has been divided by questions of military command structure and armaments, as well as by questions of military policy and the grand strategy to be followed in dealing with the Soviet Union and the threat it posed, initially to Europe alone, but later to the United States as well. There were conflicts between Washington and Charles de Gaulle, between Ronald Reagan and the European allies, and among the Europeans themselves.

Although compromises were always found to settle these disputes, discord between America and France on some issues still reverberates today, as does Britain’s almost unconditional readiness to side with the United States — as we have seen most recently in the bombing of Baghdad. And some differences of opinion within the Alliance have re-emerged on the role of nuclear weapons and the conditions under which they might be used. Yet none of these differences has proved too great to be bridged; none of them has ever seriously jeopardised the political cohesion or military strength of the Alliance.

Outside NATO, too, the states that form the Alliance have naturally had frequent and significant differences of opinion — disputes over trade and embargo problems, over agricultural, energy or monetary policy. But none of these disputes has ever seriously endangered the solidarity of the Alliance either. The Soviet threat ensured that the Atlantic Alliance was valued too highly to be undermined.
Europe’s unification

The United States has, moreover, taken a generally positive view of the development of the European Community and the gradual integration of almost all its European allies over the last 50 years, from the Schuman Plan for the European Coal and Steel Community to today’s European Union. This constructive attitude even applies to the common European currency, the euro, despite American worries about its effects on the dollar.

Both the EU and NATO exert a strong attraction today, with a considerable number of countries around the Baltic Sea, in the eastern part of Central Europe and in the Balkans eager to join the two organisations. Three of these countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, have now joined the Alliance — to the dismay of the Russians — and they and others are in line to join the EU in the next few years as well. But there is a difference between the two organisations: the future tasks of the EU have largely been spelled out, something we cannot say of NATO.

NATO’s future tasks

There has been much talk of a “new NATO” or of “new missions” for NATO, an idea advanced mainly by the United States, but this has yet to be clearly defined. The project has its genesis in the fact that the implosion of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s did away with NATO’s former common enemy. Russia no longer poses a threat to the Alliance and does not appear likely to do so in the foreseeable future. Even so, none of the allies is willing to conclude that NATO has served its purpose and completed its task. All of them would prefer to maintain the ties that bind the United States and Canada to Europe. Yet they have not been able to agree on an answer to the question: What should the future tasks of the Alliance be? Looking for an answer to this question means reviewing the world situation as it may develop in the coming decades.

First of all, centres of power are shifting. China is already regarded by many as a world power. India will be next, possibly followed by Brazil. Russia, with its vast spaces, its natural resources and its nuclear arms, will remain a world power, even if its present weakness endures for another two generations. Japan, too, will remain a world power economically and financially, despite its present crisis. Whether or not the European Union becomes a superpower of the future remains to be seen, but the euro and the further political and institutional consolidation it will bring make it probable that the EU will at least develop into an economic and financial world power.

Confronted by this future vision of a world of several great powers and superpowers, both Europeans and Americans will conclude that the Atlantic Alliance and the close links it provides between Europe and North America must be preserved. Yet this conclusion is far from providing a satisfactory definition of the future tasks and role of the Alliance.

Secondly, the character and scope of problems that these powers must face are also changing. Paramount, of course, is the ownership and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The world is no longer defined only in terms of the five traditional nuclear powers — the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France — each of which has an exclusive right of veto on the UN Security Council. There are other countries with nuclear weapons now — India, Pakistan and Israel — and no one can compel them to relinquish those weapons. Not only that, but there are a number of other states which are suspected of striving for a nuclear capability.

Oncoming challenges

But if the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is a growing challenge, the nuclear states that are party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty are not living up to their duties. They are not setting a good example for the world in terms of further steps towards nuclear disarmament; instead they are modernising their nuclear arsenals. It is in the interest of the Alliance to resume energetic efforts to further reduce the stocks of nuclear weapons and not just wage a fight against proliferation in other...
parts of the world.

In addition to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, there are other threats to world peace to contend with in the next century, including ethnic and religious rivalry, extreme nationalism and terrorism. These will be exacerbated by a combination of circumstances: globalised financial and commodity markets, worldwide technological progress, and the continuous population explosion in most parts of the world.

The twenty-first century may bring regional wars and ethnically or religiously motivated civil wars, many examples of which we have already witnessed: between India and Pakistan, between Iran and Iraq, between Israel and its Arab neighbours, in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, and elsewhere. The last ten years alone have seen two dozen regional wars throughout the world, from Iraq and Chechnya to Bosnia, Kosovo and Zaire. All these wars took place "out of area", from the perspective of the Alliance, meaning outside the territory of the parties to the North Atlantic Treaty, defined in Article 6, which alone is protected by the Alliance. Parties to the Treaty have intervened in a few of these wars, though the Alliance as a whole has become involved only in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

Joint solutions required

Because the nature and magnitude of the problems likely to confront us in the twenty-first century will prove too much for any individual state, joint solutions will be required. No state, acting alone, can ward off the damaging consequences of chaos on the financial and currency markets. No superpower, acting alone, can check the advance of the population explosion. Nor can any power, acting alone, counteract the continuing global destruction of the environment or global warming. No state, acting alone, can implement a rational world energy policy. No one, acting alone, can prevent the continued proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. No one, acting alone, can bring about global disarmament. No state, acting alone, can prevent a "clash of civilisations".

Several institutions for cooperative action are in place: the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, UNESCO and many other international organisations within which national governments work together, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the world economic summits (which China and Russia should be invited to attend as full members as soon as possible). Past experience makes it clear that all these tasks cannot be achieved by a military alliance; nor, indeed, have we made any attempt to do so over the last 50 years.

On the contrary, the centrepiece of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was — and still is! — the pledge of the members, according to Article 5 of the 1949 Washington Treaty, to consider an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and... that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking... such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.... Any such armed attack and measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council.”

Article 5 of the Washington Treaty

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The Yugoslav example

Thus the present debate regarding the future tasks of our Alliance extends — especially as far as the Americans are concerned — beyond the definitions
contained in the Treaty. Even if not expressly covered by the Treaty, it is entirely conceivable that the Alliance might, by agreement among the allies, intervene in or take action to prevent foreign wars that threaten the allies, whether directly or indirectly. This has, in fact, been the case in the former Yugoslavia, where NATO’s intervention offers a variety of examples of the problems confronting possible military activities by NATO outside the territory protected by the North Atlantic Treaty.

As far back as 1980, several European leaders, assembled for the funeral of Marshal Tito, concluded that this composite state, cobbled together at least eight nations and ethnic minorities and previously held together by the talented dictator and his brutal methods, would collapse in five or ten years at the most. No one suggested the possibility that this might, by agreement among the allies, participate. In any case, anyone who bears in mind the history of the Balkans over the centuries will take a sceptical view of the possibility of bringing stable peace to the area by any form of military intervention.

Savage warfare along ethnic and religious dividing lines then broke out on the soil of the former Yugoslavia, causing heavy loss of life among the civilian population and releasing floods of refugees. The Western powers took political action and sent military missions to put an end to the murders and persecutions — initially through the United Nations or backed by UN resolutions. The Western powers, backed by NATO’s military capability, finally succeeded in stopping the killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 and NATO has policed the peace ever since with its UN-mandated IFOR/SFOR missions.

But predictably enough, just when one fire is put out, another springs up. In the Serbian province of Kosovo. NATO has issued ultimatums to Belgrade, threatening to drop bombs even without the backing of an explicit UN resolution — since China and Russia had threatened to use their veto. The legality of the use of force against a sovereign nation without a UN mandate has now become a matter of intense debate. At the same time, it is a fact that no NATO member is obliged by treaty to participate. In any case, anyone who bears in mind the history of the Balkans over the centuries will take a sceptical view of the possibility of bringing stable peace to the area by any form of military intervention.

The American government seems to regard these events as setting a precedent for future cases of intervention in other areas, without necessarily requiring a UN Security Council resolution. But not all allies agree that the North Atlantic Treaty does provide for actions beyond the territory of the NATO member states without specific UN backing. If the United States or other parties to the Treaty want to broaden the tasks of the Alliance and the duties of the allies to include the joint armed defence of their interests in “out of area” territories, that will require a protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty, to be ratified by all members.

There has been little public debate so far on future “out of area” duties. NATO’s new Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) concept, an important aspect of its redesigned military structure, foresees possible “out of area” deployments for peace support missions. The Alliance’s lack of clarity on this issue, however, makes it very difficult for the media, the parliaments and public opinion of the allied nations to have an informed discussion on the matter. But from the democratic standpoint, we urgently need a profound public debate — similar to the quality of the euro debate that has taken place throughout Europe in the last few years — before fundamentally broadening or reshaping the aims of the Alliance.

Any extension of the substantive and geographical scope of the North Atlantic Alliance will have to ensure that such changes are accurately defined. Any broadening of the tasks of the Alliance, and of the duties of the allies, would have to recognise the precedence of the UN Charter, and especially Article 51, which gives the Security Council the final right of decision even in cases where the allies are exercising their right of self-defence.
The attitude of America’s politicians towards the UN has presently become somewhat ambiguous. The broad consensus on foreign policy to which we were formerly accustomed has become weakened. Some influential politicians and their advisers regard NATO as a useful instrument in securing America’s long-term global interests. Others, however, take a more cautious view. While America as a whole still displays its customary vitality, it seems less circumspect and consistent in matters of foreign policy and strategy than it used to be in former decades.

Anyone promoting the picture of America as a solitary superpower, having to act as the global arbitrator and peacemaker to keep the world in order with the assistance of NATO, needs to bear in mind the experience of Korea and Vietnam, of “Desert Storm” and other peace processes backed up by threats of armed force. The American nation may be inclined to regard its own set of values and the American way of life as a good thing for the world as a whole. But it is only in extremely dramatic and exceptional cases, where the vital interests of America itself are at stake, that the nation would be prepared to engage in foreign wars and accept the need for widespread American loss of life. The United States much prefers to use its military high technology at long range, letting its allies field the troops.

Preparing for NATO’s new missions

Europeans like to recall John F. Kennedy’s image of the “two pillars” of North America and Europe on which the North Atlantic Alliance was to be based. European integration, however, has still not progressed to a level that would justify calling the European pillar equal to that of America. Neither the European Union (EU) nor the “sleeping beauty” of the Western European Union (WEU) has so far developed into an entity capable of foreign policy or strategic action. Nevertheless, the EU and its 15 current member states are moving in that direction.

Yet there is a long way to go, and, in view of the EU’s tendency towards internal procrastination, an acceleration of the process can hardly be expected. After all, world history offers no model, no parallel, for the voluntary political and economic fusion of numerous independent nations, each with one or more of its own languages, and its own culture and heritage spanning many centuries. The road to European integration is — and will remain in the twenty-first century — a road that can only be travelled by means of a great many separate steps, some shorter, some longer.

A sober analysis is needed

Meanwhile, there is still an urgent need for partnership between Europe and North America. But the fiftieth birthday of our successful Alliance should not allow an excess of emotion to prevail over sober analysis of our future tasks and capabilities as we see them today. They certainly do not compel us to change the North Atlantic Treaty and the European Union must not become a strategic satellite of the United States.

Yet future “out of area” problems may well require joint action on the part of the allies. There is no automatic contractual mechanism to cover such eventualities. Each individual case will require consultation and consensus among the allies. Some sort of advance authorisation, in general and abstract terms, to conduct out-of-area activities, would not be in accordance with the Treaty; it would also not be in the long-term interests of either the European or the American high contracting parties.

In conventional international law, all sovereign states are equal. The fact is that the five permanent UN Security Council members are more equal than others; the fact is that all states with nuclear weapons are more equal than others; the fact is that the United States today is militarily superior to all other states — it alone today could deploy its military forces to any location on the surface of the Earth. For Europeans and Canadians, it is a comforting advantage to stand alongside this superpower in a mutual defensive alliance. Yet that alliance cannot keep the peace everywhere in the world, nor can it solve the massive non-military problems that mankind faces in the twenty-first century.