



Fundacja
Aleksandra Kwaśniewskiego
AMICUS EUROPAE

POLICY PAPERS

No 25/2010

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NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT – A POLISH PERSPECTIVE

Warsaw, September 6, 2010

*Editor's note: This analysis has been prepared within a Friedrich Ebert Foundation
project on NATO reform*

The end of the 80-ties witnessed a quick and mostly peaceful democratic transformation in Central Europe. Since the beginning of that decade, Poland was in the vanguard of these changes. The Solidarity trade union led by the staunch anti-communist leader Lech Walesa grew up to an unprecedented opposition movement and was empowered by over 10 million members (one-fourth of the population). In 1989 the weakened communist government agreed to negotiations at a round table on power-sharing and free elections. On June 4th, 1989 the first partially free elections were held and shortly after – August 12th – the first non-communist government under Tadeusz Mazowiecki was sworn in. The political and economic transformation in Poland has begun and was to be followed soon by changes in other countries of the Eastern block.

Years that followed witnessed an 180 degree shift in Polish foreign and security policy. This was an era of uncertainty and change for the whole region. The Warsaw Pact – once mighty opponent of NATO – slowly deteriorated , only to be fully resolved in July 1991. The Soviet Union collapsed too, but Soviet troops stationed on Polish territory and in the neighboring former East Germany. All of the neighbors disappeared from one day to the another – instead of three states (GDR, Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union) Poland bordered seven – united Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russian Federation (Kaliningrad Region). Relations with these new states had to be established almost from the scratch.

Changing borders and political transformation are often the breeding ground for uncertainty and instability, especially when accompanied by unresolved ethnic and territorial disputes. The Balkan conflict was an exemplification of what can happen when things go wrong. Fortunately, Central and Eastern Europe was able to pass the period of national rebirth and redefinition without serious disputes and conflicts.

The political changes were in its substance positive, with one important exclusion. The collapse of hitherto political alliances and security arrangements created a very unfavorable condition for Poland, namely a “security vacuum” in Central and Eastern Europe. In other words, the need for security and predictability was not properly satisfied by the existing security framework, including bilateral relations, regional cooperation and multilateral organizations like the UN or CSCE/OSCE. This resulted in a true political dilemma for the newborn democracies.

Poland and other CEE states had to decide what security option they should pursue. With Soviet troops still on the ground it was everything but an easy task.

In these days all potential security arrangements were taken in account. Neutrality, regional alliances, Russia-NATO cross security guarantees. NATO membership was among the options, but seemed at that time the most challenging and distant. Not only NATO itself was rather unwilling and cautious, also Russia strongly opposed the idea, vowing to have a veto-right stemming from the political agreement for the re-unification of Germany. Having the feeling of hammering a wall, President Lech Wałęsa proposed even at one point in 1992 the idea of a new NATO-look alike (NATO-bis). The message was simple - if you don't accept us, we will form our own club.

All possibilities were seriously discussed. But in fact, historical experiences and geographical location left anything but one option valid – applying for NATO membership. The arguments were straightforward. Poland is a country located in the center of Europe, at its crossroads from West to the East and North to the South. The terrain is mostly flat making it hard to defend. Due to this fact Poland witnessed 123 years of lost independence and division between three more powerful neighbors. In the past all major European wars were fought in Poland. The Cold War could add to this another tragic chapter. A war game exercise (code-named Seven Days to the River Rhine) developed in 1979 by the Warsaw Pact and published along other documents in 2005 by the Polish government depicted a vision of a seven-day East-West atomic war. On a map, a long line of nuclear mushroom clouds neatly stamped along the Vistula, where Soviet bloc commanders assumed that NATO tactical nuclear weapons would rain down to block reinforcements arriving from the East. The lecture of today's possible war scenarios in Europe – how unlikely they may seem - does not probably entitle Poles to be much more optimistic.

A political and public consensus for applying to NATO was achieved soon and easy. Poland began its membership drive in March 1990, just 10 months after the demise of communist rule. It was almost ten years when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic finally joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on March 12, 1999.

NATO's role for today's Poland

The political imperative of NATO's role for today's Poland follows three simple notions. First, as back in the 90-ties so today NATO membership is the only proven option that gives an assured security framework for Poland. Second, NATO guarantees at the same time that the United States will remain politically and militarily involved in European issues. And three, the

Treaty binds Poland and Germany together in an multilateral Alliance, which is an unprecedented development in the history of the uneasy relationship of both countries. One of the turning points in the relations of both countries was the role Germany played in the successful bid for Poland's NATO membership. The unparalleled support and advocacy for Polish Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations was a milestone for Polish-German reconciliation, building of trust and confidence between Warsaw and Berlin.

From this perspective, the elaboration of the New Strategic Concept is certainly seen in Warsaw as a timely step in the right direction. It was there widespread knowledge too, that a refreshment treatment was badly needed for the Alliance's 1999 major strategic document. Standing for the traditional mission of NATO as a defensive alliance, Warsaw was certainly worried with opinions questioning the relevance of NATO for addressing today's challenges. From that viewpoint Gerhard Schroeders (in)famous Munich speech did more harm than good, putting into doubt existing platforms of cooperation and consultation and offering hardly a viable alternative. Therefore the New Strategic Concept is clearly an important attempt to build consensus around strategic issues, but also an instrument to reinvigorate NATO, to remind us again on its importance and make it more relevant to the changed security requirements.

Good too that the old habit of drafting new strategies by anonymous experts has been put to the closet by Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's Secretary General. Wisdom and expertise is by no means limited today to security councils and government organizations. Poland had in the NATO's group of experts one representative, Professor Adam Daniel Rotfeld. It would be not an easy task to find someone in Poland more entitled to contribute to such a Report. An internationally recognized specialist in security and disarmament issues, former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute left an easy recognizable - for someone who knows his opinions - imprint on the final Report. The Polish input to the Report stemmed also from the formal consultation that the NATO's group of experts carried out in Warsaw, as well as numerous informal meetings, conferences and seminars.

From a theoretical point of view every strategy is a combination of three elements: strategic goals, ways and methods of achieving them and the necessary means (resources). The document that has been prepared by the group of experts is therefore by no means a strategy. As the authors rightly put it on the front page, it is only a package of analysis and recommendation that provides useful insights and can be used for preparing the final strategic concept of NATO. We should bear that fact in mind while assessing this document.

Challenges to NATO

The text seems to bring to the forefront two interlinked challenges for the Alliance. First, that the very existence of NATO's political dimension is put into doubt. Alternative legal and institutional approaches to security are hammered out not only in Moscow, but even in NATO capitals. Success in Afghanistan turns out to be "inevitable" for NATO's survival, a "be or not to be" for the Alliance. In consequence - quoting the Report - "NATO today is busier than it has ever been, but its value is less obvious to many than in the past". The added value of NATO to Euroatlantic security, its attainments and effectiveness as a political and military alliance get lost somewhere in everyday politics. NATO seems to be treated just as a "tool-box". Therefore political and strategic disagreements (Iraq war of 2003, missile shield, Russia policy, Afghanistan strategy etc.) combined with old rivalries, military and financial imbalances could result in stagnation, and then slowly deterioration of the Alliance.

The second substantial challenge refers to the changing nature of today's security threats. NATO is an organization that was designed for deterring and – if needed – repelling an all-out Soviet assault during the Cold War. Although successful in that mission, to remain relevant in XXI century, NATO has to adapt to new dangers and demands of complex, asymmetrical operations. The ongoing transformation, adaptation and modernization of Alliances capabilities is a condition sine qua non for reinvigorating NATO and making it useful for addressing new threats.

Putting first things first – core tasks in the New Strategic Concept

Poland and most of the new NATO's member states clearly prioritize the traditional task of NATO's collective defense. These are NATO's outer rim states, relatively small, with fresh memories of lost independence and repression, bordering the still unpredictable region of Eastern Europe, with highly unstable areas like Transdnistria. Historical and ethnic tensions are not rare, to name the example of Russian minority in the Baltic States only. Everyday reality are large military imbalances, having on one side the conventional and nuclear power of Russia, and on the other small and ill-equipped armies of CEE countries. Political and economic pressure backed by Russian sovereign fund investments is a serious concern for capitals ranging from Tallinn to Sofia. Energy cut-offs and other energy supply issues add another layer to the stockpile of security concerns. From that perspective NATO was and still is the ultimate guarantee for sustained political and military stability in the region. Security in Europe is indivisible, and any weakening of NATO would result in the growth of a relative feeling of uncertainty, particularly strong in Central and Eastern Europe.

Although priority for traditional defense tasks is obvious in Warsaw, putting them against new abilities of NATO is a false dilemma. Terrorism, cyber-attacks, global nuclear proliferation, humanitarian consequences of failed states, piracy or energy supply security are these kind of threats that are clearly exceeding the response potential of even larger and better-off countries. The question is whether NATO should be dealing with all of them, meaning that NATO would probably have to evolve into a security organization.

The answer to this question given by the group of experts goes probably along the mainstream thinking in Poland. Putting it short - adapting yes, overstretching no. And a warning - do not overestimate NATO's abilities. Warsaw clearly expects NATO to adapt itself to dealing with some of the new challenges, but surely not all of them. In other words, NATO should facilitate a global partnership for security, but cannot be the guardian of global peace and security. Energy supply security can be dealt with for instance through the existing emergency response mechanism of the International Energy Agency and European Union. Nuclear proliferation cannot be resolved without a true partnership with China and Russia. NATO is fully engaged in fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and stabilizing the country, but it is hardly expected to embark on such distant mission soon after. NATO is not and will not be a universal platform for problem-solving and pan-global security. New age requires new partnerships, and a strategy of building them should be a pivotal point of the New Strategic Concept.

Warsaw is certainly concerned also with the internal divisions in the Alliance. Fissures go sometimes deep into NATO's crust in terms of burden-sharing, military spending, national caveats, US force deployment, enlargement - just naming only few and leaving out before-mentioned political heavy-weights like Russia policy, transatlantic relations, consensus building (the almost forgotten deadlock around Turkey's request for military assistance before the 2003 Iraq invasion). This is surely worrying for NATO's new members and is the reason to seek additional security arrangements, most often across the Atlantic. Keeping Americans in was one of the objectives of the Washington Treaty. Although a highly criticized strategy today in many Western societies, it is still a fundamental goal of NATO for Poland and other new member states. The United States give the necessary "heavy weight" to NATO military capabilities, which is inevitable when dealing with security concerns originating from NATO's Eastern neighborhood.

The same refers to reallocating NATO or US military infrastructure to the territories of new member states. Not surprising, historical references seem to play a main role in defining CEE approach to this issue. One of the weaknesses of past alliances was that political agreements were not backed by military deployments. Poland first-handily experienced that in 1939. This

experience influences modern strategies, too. No doubt, having either NATO installations or a US missile shield is a welcomed option in Poland. It is surely seen as a security bonus, even if causing nervous reactions from Moscow, including the possible gearing-up of forces in the Kaliningrad region. Everything that strengthens a physical deployment of forces in the region will find therefore staunch support in Warsaw and other CEE capitals. Thus not surprising are current Polish proposals advertised by Minister of Defense Bogdan Klich. The transfer of NATO infrastructure to the new member states, contingency planning for all NATO members (including the Baltic States), large scale 2013 NRF exercises in Poland and further NATO enlargement indisputably occupy top places among Polish priorities.

New member states also do what they can to help the “ultimate NATO test” – Afghanistan – to succeed. ISAF already last year witnessed an over-proportional participation of Polish Army soldiers (2.500) with no use-of-force limitations. This year the Polish contingent will be additionally beefed up by several hundred combat troops.

This brings us to just another problem, today quite specific to Western Europe, but also slowly and surely embracing Central Europe and crossing the Atlantic. Social attitude to global security has changed much since the times of cold war, and people are less and less prepared to accept financial and human burdens of military actions. Analysts already hammered out the term of “post-heroic societies” for describing it. Thus putting new tasks ahead of NATO has its logic, but without social understanding and support the grand plans can be short-lived. EU experiences in bringing institutions closer to the citizens – insightful with the overlapping memberships - are unfortunately not encouraging. The group of experts recognizes that challenge and proposes to “Tell the NATO’s story”, but how to carry it out in practice and achieve a success requires further discussions.

NATO-Russia from national perspective

Polish attitude and strategy towards Russia is often simplified or even misinterpreted. Warsaw fully subscribes to the idea of building a cooperative Euro-Atlantic security order, including security cooperation with Russia. What can be surprising to many, even the idea of having Russia as a member of NATO (presented lately in Der Spiegel article by i.a. by K.Naumann, V.Ruhe, F.Elbe) did not meet a fundamental opposition in Warsaw. Many argue that it would even be desirable, assuming that internal Russian reforms would change that country into a friendly, democratic state dedicated to the rule of law, and with a true cooperative attitude to its neighborhood. Till this happens, the opening towards Russia should be safeguarded by a strong commitment to take into account the security interests of neighboring states, both

NATO and aspiring to the Alliance. NATO still remains a mega-thorny issue in Moscow, the first threat and potential enemy. Moreover, when Europe is disregarding power politics, Russia seems to reintroducing it. The invasion of Georgia is a limelight example. The support for the secession of Abkhazia, Osetia or Transdnistria only adds to the grim picture. Therefore the key to bridging the existing gaps with NATO lies clearly in Russian hands.

Nuclear strategy and disarmament

The nuclear component of NATO was put to the backstage with the end of the cold war. Some have even forgotten that nuclear ammunitions are still stationed in Europe. But they are here and still play an important role in NATO's defense strategy. In fact, US and NATO's strategy of using nuclear weapons has probably not changes so much as the Russian did. Moscow's military doctrine place tactical nuclear weapons for the same roles as in NATO's nuclear planning from the 70-ties and 80-ties. Because of the numerical and technological weakness of Russia's conventional land forces today, tactical nukes would be weapons of choice for stopping NATO's invasion.

On the other side, the world observes a significant decrease in the number of strategic warheads (new START Treat signed in April 2010 in Prague). This would not be the case without a change in the US and Russia's strategic nuclear doctrine, namely a diminishing role of nuclear deterrence. In other words, we seem to be witnessing today a less likely chance for a global nuclear conflict, but even greater risk for tactical use of nuclear weapons. Reviewing the shortlist of other nuclear states and conflicts involving them is not an optimistic exercise either. The Report concludes that so long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO should continue to maintain secure and reliable nuclear forces. Warsaw will surely be among these capitals subscribing to this recommendation, as well as supporting the stationing of nuclear weaponry in Europe.

The Report rather limits NATO capabilities to counter nuclear proliferation, at least in political sense. The alliance can add value but mostly in terms of information exchange, coordination and consultation among allies. The same concerns conventional arms control where NATO has significant past achievements within the CFE Treaty. Inspections according to the CFE Protocol of Inspections were not only verifying the military equipment status but played a crucial role as a confidence-building measure between East and West. They were the only instrument that allowed NATO and Russia officers to visit each other's bases and military training areas in short notice. After the unilateral 2007 suspension of the Treaty by Russia, Europe has lost an important mechanism of stability promotion and cooperation. The Group of Experts proposes to undertake a new effort to revive the New CFE Treaty. In fact, some of

Russian complaints about the CFE Treaty regime in new circumstances made sense. Therefore there is surely field for maneuver and consensus with the Russian Federation.

One of the motives for the CFE Treaty suspension were the previous US administration's plans for setting up Missile Defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic. But paradoxically, Barack's Obama decision to give up this project turned out to be rather a Pyrrhic victory for Russia. Instead of MD anti-ballistic missiles, which in fact were not a threat to Russian strategic nuclear forces, a US Patriot Air Defense battery was stationed in a tiny Polish city of Morag. The arrival of Patriots was part of the MD deal, to ease Warsaw's security concerns. Moscow will now witness in Poland the presence of a modern US air defense system. The Patriot reallocation is a source of criticism from Moscow but can hardly be seen as a provocative move. It is a purely defensive platform. Moreover both in the Kaliningrad region as well as Belarus Russia has long time ago deployed their S-300 systems, which are hardly matched by rather obsolete Soviet-age air-defense equipment in Poland.

Conclusion

The Report of the group of experts is certainly an excellent introduction to the transatlantic debate on NATO's new Strategic Concept. The authors tried to address the dilemma how to combine the traditional role of a defensive Alliance with the requirements of new global tasks, while keeping NATO cohesive and progressive. The main strength of this attempt is that everyone in the Alliance will find there what one thinks NATO core tasks should be. New members states will cherish the assured security, some other countries the dynamic engagement philosophy, flexibility and new partnerships. Blending turned out to be good not only for Scotch whisky. Only those who think that NATO is irrelevant can find themselves disappointed. The document puts black on white why a renewed Alliance should remain the backbone of transatlantic security and stability. Let us only hope that the famous sentence of Thomas Jefferson engraved in NATO's seal that Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom is still understood well among allies.

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