

Active Engagement, Modern Defense, and Military Interventions

NATO Strategy: Present, Past, and Future

Background

November 19, 2020, marked ten years since the adoption of NATO's Active Engagement, Modern Defense strategy. On this day Center for Strategic Studies at the Fletcher School, Tufts University convened a Transatlantic Workshop bringing together experts, scholars, and policymakers to reflect on NATO's relations with the great powers and its contribution to peace through collective security. The workshop's participants discussed NATO's relations with Russia and China and the role the United States plays in the alliance. They also reflected on the costs and benefits of multilateral interventions, including joint training and exercises. The Fletcher School's Center for Strategic Studies brought a data-driven perspective on the multilateral use of force, relying on the novel Military Intervention Project's (MIP) database. The below discussion presents the main insights from the workshop and their policy implications.

Summary

- In the future decades, NATO will have to operate in a new threat environment that cannot be effectively addressed by kinetic means only;
- The emerging challenges include the erosion of international architecture, democratic backsliding, disinformation campaigns, conventional and sub-conventional threats coming from Russia and China;
- Under new conditions, the utility of military interventions will diminish;
- To adapt to future challenges, NATO will have to rely on cooperative crisis management below the level of the use of force;
- NATO should invest in intellectual capabilities and policy analysis and rely on historical and quantitative data to develop the portfolio of effective strategies beyond interventions;
- U.S. policy towards NATO will be an essential factor enabling adaptation and cohesion in the face of the changing threat environment.

NATO and Emerging Challenges

Scholars, experts, and practitioners invited to the workshop highlighted the necessity to adjust future NATO's strategy to the emerging security challenges, including the erosion of public trust in international and local institutions, democratic backsliding, disinformation campaigns, environmental and climate-related threats, refugee crises, as well as conventional and sub-conventional threats coming from Russia and China. Experts noticed that the military force could not address the majority of these pressing security challenges. Therefore, looking in the future, NATO should invest in intellectual capabilities and policy analysis to develop a portfolio of adequate strategies beyond military interventions.

Erosion of international architecture and democracy

The defining feature of the last 15 to 20 years in Global Affairs has been the slow erosion of the International architecture, said Manuel Muñiz, Secretary of State for Global Spain at the Spanish Foreign Ministry. The international arena is becoming less multilateral, less open, less cosmopolitan, less democratic. There are two driving forces for this phenomenon: The first is the rise of illiberal powers questioning the central features of an international order governed by multilateral institutions. The second is the implosion of the liberal order from within. The global trend of democratic erosion, including in the NATO countries (Hungary, Poland, Turkey), presents an emerging challenge, undermining the institutional legitimacy on the national level and complicating the cooperation on the international level.

Disinformation campaigns

Another pressing issue is the disinformation campaigns, especially related to COVID-19 pandemics. According to Muñiz, European External Action Service registered 8000 disinformation campaigns from 2015 to August 2020. A quarter of these campaigns are associated with COVID-19 and occurred between March and August 2020. These campaigns question European democracies' capacity to tackle the pandemic and claim that international architecture is weak in the face of this new challenge and requires revision and replacement.

NATO is the central pillar of the international security architecture. Therefore, it needs to develop capabilities in the digital sphere to resist disinformation effectively. NATO also has to prioritize its independence in digital infrastructure and build resilience to the negative consequences of disinformation campaigns.

Russia's Role in European and Global Security

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary-General of NATO for Emerging Security Challenges (2010-2018), underscored that in light of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine, NATO has to revise its strategy when it comes to deterring Russia. Russia is modernizing its nuclear arsenal while withdrawing from arms control treaties. NATO has to decide how it will respond to this new configuration of the old threat. E.J. Herold, Executive Director of IISS–Americas, former NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary-General for Defence

Investment, believes that the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia paradoxically renewed the unity and purpose of the alliance as it returns to deterrence and has to modernize its capabilities for a new environment.

The second Russia-related challenge relates to accepting new members to the alliance. According to Mary Sarotte, Kravis Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies at Johns Hopkins University, NATO expansion after the Cold War remains one of Vladimir Putin's main grievances that continues to affect US-Russian relations and Russia's international behavior. Igor Istomin, Associate Professor, Department of Applied International Political Analysis at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), argues that in the early 1990s, the Kremlin had an expectation of a pan-European alternative for mutual security and wanted to influence the security architecture in Europe. NATO's expansion and interventions in Europe in the 1990s put an end to these aspirations and communicated Russia's outsider status in European security. According to Istomin, however, disagreements about security in Europe is at the top of Russia's current concerns. Instead, the Kremlin is anxious about Western interference in Russia's domestic politics.

Robert Bell, Distinguished Professor of the Practice at Georgia Tech and the U.S. Defense Advisor at NATO (2010-2017), claims that in to decrease the Russian tensions with NATO and the West, it is necessary to put together a comprehensive package of risk reduction strategies including military to military contracts.

NATO-China relations

In 2019 NATO issued a statement naming China as a potential challenger to the alliance. According to Thomas Cavanna, Assistant Research Professor of Strategic Studies at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, it took so long for NATO to recognize China's strategic importance since, due to the geographic distance, China was beyond the scope of the alliance's attention. Meanwhile, China paid close attention to post-Cold War developments in Europe. NATO's military interventions of the 1990s raised concern in China as they signaled unilateralism and militarism on the part of the United States. As NATO consolidated partnerships with China's neighboring countries in Asia, China became even more concerned about the alliance. Mission creep in NATO's Libya intervention that resulted in Gaddafi's removal enraged and alarmed Chinese policymakers, who consider NATO as an extension of U.S. hegemony, even further.

In recent years China has increased its profile in Europe, for many years with its strategic infrastructure investments, especially in the digital domain. This development poses a challenge for the alliance as it can limit NATO's mobility and operational independence. According to Cavanna, NATO has to invest in cybersecurity and the preservation of independent supply chains to address this issue.

The limited utility of military interventions

Recent military engagements and new challenges exposed the limits of what NATO can achieve by deploying troops on the ground. These conditions require the alliance to adjust its approach to interventions while expanding its strategic repertoire.

Despite the fact that NATO emerged during the Cold War, it did not launch any military operations in this period. However, after the end of the Cold War, NATO got involved in a number of military interventions in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Ariella Viehe, Head of Operations “B” – Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Global Coalition, on the NATO International Staff, stated that as of November 2020, about 20,000 NATO troops are engaged in NATO operations worldwide. According to Viehe, interventions are now part of NATO’s DNA. However, the experience of previous interventions exposed the limits of what can be achieved by the use of military force. In particular, it became evident that the political climate has to be ripe for the intervention to be successful. Alternatively, the initial goal of the deployment will be modified by the political challenges on the ground.

For example, Lydia Sizer, former Libya Desk Officer at U.S. Department of State and Fletcher Ph.D. Candidate, says that while Libya intervention, initially planned as a humanitarian mission, was supposed to be cheap and quick in comparison to previous NATO interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite a well-coordinated multilateral military effort, this intervention sparked international controversy due to subsequent Libya’s descent into conflict. Thus, failure to recognize the political realities on the ground can make a tactically successful operation a strategic challenge. Simultaneously, the necessity to adapt to the realities of local politics makes interventions longer, more complex, and requires NATO to expand the repertoire of strategies of conflict management.

Increasing NATO Preparedness to the New Challenges

Cooperative crisis management beyond interventions

Democratic erosion, climate change, cyber threats, disinformation campaigns, and balancing against Russia and China cannot be effectively addressed with military interventions. These emerging threats and new international realities require NATO to adopt a new security paradigm to stabilize countries relying on a limited number of troops while using local effort and capacity-building measures. Jamie Shea noted that addressing new challenges would require NATO to expand its institutional cooperation beyond defense and foreign ministries and adopt a whole-of-government approach.

Similarly, Karst Brandsma, U.S. Army Colonel, Director of Training and Exercises for U.S. Army Europe and Africa, underscored that to address existing and emerging challenges, especially those that cannot be solved by putting boots on the ground, it is crucial to increase cooperation capacity of allies and partners in NATO. It would enable the alliance to achieve effective escalation management and provide solutions below the level of the use of force.

Therefore, it is essential to work on NATO convergence, ensuring that every ally sees the problem through the same lens and is willing to contribute resources and political will to its resolution.

Burden-sharing beyond spending

Developing new effective strategies to address the emerging challenges will require NATO to engage with burden-sharing, including but not limited to military spending. In recent years, continuous pressure from the U.S. presidential administrations encouraged some allies to meet the 2% defense spending commitment. According to E.J. Herold, the real question of burden-sharing should be about the joint responsibility and the political will to deploy NATO resources.

Therefore, according to Robert Bell, the next U.S. administration must hold the allies to all commitments stated in the Wales Summit Declaration, beyond the 2% goal. These commitments pertain to allies' assurance, adaptation to new threats, exercise, enhancing intelligence, strategic awareness, and advance planning. Effective political, military, and financial burden-sharing between the allies will enable NATO to invest in resilience operations, improve intra-alliance connectivity, and generate advanced scientific and technical knowledge necessary to address new threats.

Implementing lessons learned from previous interventions

NATO needs to expand its strategic repertoire beyond military interventions and incorporate the lessons learned from previous multilateral military actions. To this end, the alliance has to systematically review qualitative and quantitative evidence of intervention efficiency. For instance, Lydia Sizer underscores the critical importance of the use of historical evidence in intervention planning. According to Sizer, the attention to historical complexities of the political situation in Libya would have been instrumental for adequate expectation management concerning what a limited NATO intervention can and cannot accomplish.

Careful analysis of quantitative data is also critical for analyzing the trends of intervention effectiveness and identifying current and future challenges. The data from the Military Intervention Project (MIP) at the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the Fletcher School can provide this necessary insight. According to Monica Toft, Professor of International Politics and CSS Director, the MIP data show that U.S. allied interventions, including with NATO, tend to be significantly longer than non-allied interventions. At the same time, longer multilateral interventions result in fewer casualties than unilateral efforts. These and similar data-driven insights could guide NATO in balancing the potential costs and benefits of future interventions.

U.S. policy towards NATO under the Biden administration

U.S. policy towards NATO under the incoming presidential administration will have a definitive effect on how the alliance will address the new challenges and adopt the necessary changes. Robert Bell underscored that the U.S. would have to reassure its allies that the new administration respects and values participation in NATO and remains committed to the core

collective security principle of Article V. To this end, President Biden will have to restore the arms control as a crucial détente pillar of NATO, effectively address or even reverse Trump’s troop cuts in Germany, and initiate the future nuclear posture review by NATO to redefine the deterrent utility of the U.S. clear weapons in Europe. In addition, holding all allies accountable to the agreements reached at the Wales summit would not only enable the alliance to adjust to the new challenges but also communicate the seriousness of the U.S. commitment to collective security.

Center for Strategic Studies is grateful for contributing to the Transatlantic Workshop to

Rachel Kyte, Dean of the Fletcher School, Tufts University

Manuel Muñiz, Secretary of State for Global Spain at the Spanish Foreign Ministry

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General of NATO for Emerging Security Challenges 2010-2018

E.J. Herold, Executive Director of IISS–Americas, former NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Defence Investment

Mary Sarotte, Kravis Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies at SAIS

Robert Bell, Distinguished Professor of the Practice at Georgia Tech and PhD Candidate at Fletcher

Igor Istomin, Associate Professor, Department of Applied International Political Analysis, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO);

Thomas Cavanna, Assistant Research Professor of Strategic Studies, Fletcher School

Karst Brandsma, U.S. Army Colonel, Director of Training and Exercises for US Army Europe and Africa, Fletcher PhD Candidate

Ariella Viehe, Head of Operations “B” – Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Global Coalition, NATO International Staff

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We are grateful to NATO Public Diplomacy Division for supporting the workshop.

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