



## Transcript

# NATO: Back to the Future?

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## Introduction

My brief talk this evening is entitled *NATO: Back to the Future?* It is important to point out that there is a question-mark in the title! I want to argue that, particularly since the events in and around Georgia during the summer, when it became clear that European security still had a primitive edge to it, the dynamics of European security have shifted substantially in NATO's favour. But not so substantially that we now find ourselves on the brink of a new Cold War – not even the most ardent NATO-phile could welcome that prospect. And not so substantially, either, that all NATO's post-Cold War problems are now over. I have divided my comments into three sections: Past, Present and Future.

## Past

The part of NATO's past I'm concerned with here is really just the last two decades – I don't want to go all the way back to 1949. The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and very early 1990s was nothing short of a crisis for NATO. After all, the Alliance's 40-year old politico-military rationale seemed to have disappeared, almost overnight. In the absence of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, with the 'New World Order' breaking out, and with finance ministries getting excited about the 'peace dividend', what was the point of this vast, complex, expensive and uncomfortably adversarial alliance?

Two well-known quotations sum up NATO's problem perfectly. Thucydides: *In an alliance the only safe guarantee is an equality of mutual fear.*<sup>i</sup> In the early 1990s, where was the mutual fear around which an alliance could organise? And a little later, the nineteenth century Greek poet Constantine Cavafy in his poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians':

*some who have just returned from the border say there are no barbarians any longer. And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution.*<sup>ii</sup>

On several occasions in the early 1990s, NATO's prospects appeared far from promising, with charges of indecisiveness, lack of leadership, and institutional obsolescence flying around Europe and back and forth across the Atlantic. As disagreement deepened over the Yugoslavia crisis, the transatlantic security partnership looked for a while to be on its last legs. The

partnership endured a particularly serious assault in November 1994 when, as a result of Congressional pressure, the Clinton Administration announced that it would no longer help to enforce the UN arms embargo on the Bosnian government. Britain and France protested that their lightly-armed troops deployed on UNPROFOR peacekeeping tasks would be made vulnerable to Bosnian Serb attack. This prompted the leader writer of the normally cool and calm *Economist* newspaper to ask whether NATO governments would look back on this 'bombshell' as 'their first formal parting of the ways', and 'the beginning of a rift that fatally weakened their alliance.'<sup>iii</sup> Some months later, the US announcement was described with even more finality as 'the last straw, breaking the back of allied unity.'<sup>iv</sup>

For international relations theorists of the realist persuasion, the end of the Cold War prompted a good deal of debate on the nature and purpose of politico-military alliances, and international co-operation more broadly. For some, the significance of the end of the Cold War was not simply that the military threat had disappeared, but that the bipolar balance had come to an end, and with it nothing less than the rationale for the transatlantic security partnership. Faced with the uncomfortable prospect of NATO's *survival* after the end of bipolarity - against theory and all the odds - some structural realists responded stubbornly that the inevitability of the Alliance's collapse was more a matter of logic than of timetables.<sup>v</sup>

NATO has proved them wrong so far. But then, it's only been 20 years...The analysts who might have had a closer grasp of the way things were moving after the Cold War were those who saw in NATO's continuance an 'institutional survival instinct' at work. Complex bureaucracies are good at keeping themselves going – not least, course, because the people working in them have careers to build, mortgages to pay etc.

But how well has NATO managed since the early 1990s? Not very well, I have to concede. The Alliance has certainly been busy: admitting new members in a series of enlargements; devising new strategic concepts; and becoming more involved in operations. But it still has not been able to find a strategic rationale anything like as convincing as the Cold War. And NATO has also been confronted by a different sort of rivalry – the argument that the security needs of the twenty-first century can be met more effectively with a 'civil power' organisation – one capable of projecting both 'hard' military might

as much as 'soft' diplomatic and economic influence – in other words the European Union and its CFSP/ESDP.

## Present

Quite apart from the NATO/EU rivalry (which resurfaces roughly every 2 years, usually in the guise of a major 'breakthrough' which soon comes to not very much), NATO's 'present' is dominated by the Russia/Georgia crisis earlier this year. From the perspective of one who follows NATO's fortunes fairly closely, I would say that this was a signal event for European – and indeed international – security: Russian armoured columns crossed a border in force and occupied the territory of a neighbouring country. There can be no doubt that the Russian troops were well-prepared for the incursion, even if only because they had just finished military exercises. These things do not happen off the cuff.

What does all this mean for NATO? In the first place, I imagine that NATO's military capability experts will have watched the Russian military performance very closely indeed, and will have noticed that the Georgians managed to acquit themselves remarkably well – even if only for a short time – against Russian air and armoured forces. But of course the real significance was geopolitical. In August 2008 Russia did what it hadn't done for decades – invade a sovereign country on its borders. And it did so to the accompaniment of a new and rather sinister geopolitical euphemism. After World War II we heard a lot about 'spheres of influence' and 'peaceful co-existence'; at the height of the Cold War we had the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' and 'fraternal assistance' and then the 'near abroad'. And for the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have Russia's assertion that it enjoys 'privileged interests' in countries along its borders, particularly in those where a significant proportion of ethnic Russians can be found.

The lesson of Georgia 2008 has certainly not been ignored in all those small countries around Russia's periphery – and indeed in some larger ones, particularly Ukraine, where one third of the populations is ethnic Russian, and Moldova, bordering the EU. Let's not forget Poland and the Czech Republic, either; the new home of a US anti-missile system for which Russia has expressed its disapproval. In straightforward terms, what Georgia signifies is precisely what many of these countries have been telling NATO governments for years: "We cannot trust our territorial security to Russian reassurances;

we need to be locked into a west European security and defence arrangement, with a direct relationship to the United States; and Article 5 of the NATO Treaty still matters – very much.” The contrasting view, of course, is that all this talk of Article 5 – largely by the United States – is what brought the problem about it the first place, by creating expectations of NATO membership within Georgia and similar countries that NATO could never realistically honour. What would Georgian membership of NATO really have meant in terms of security guarantees?!

NATO did not emerge well from the Georgian crisis: accused of adopting an enlargement policy which gives Russia the impression of being encircled; accused of raising Georgian hopes of NATO membership (and the security guarantees that come with it), and then accused of abandoning Georgia in its moment of emergency. There are other considerations to bear in mind, too. What Georgia also represents for NATO – and the image could hardly be more vivid – is that conventional arms control in and around Europe still matters. The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), for all its difficulties, can surely no longer be considered a legacy of the Cold War, a diplomatic dinosaur. And NATO is also aware – as indeed is the whole of Europe – that it is dealing with a Russia which is rather enjoying its ‘energy moment’.

## Future

In my view NATO is as uncomfortable as it has been for a very long time. A series of questions can be asked:

### Fundamental questions:

#### *Enlargement.*

What should NATO do about enlargement? This is not a theoretical problem – let’s not forget that at the Bucharest summit in April this year, NATO leaders decided that Georgia will become a member. But when? It seems to me that to turn away an application from this or that country, perhaps on the grounds that Russia might be upset, is effectively to give Russia a veto on NATO’s membership. NATO has always said this is precisely what it will not and cannot do; so I don’t see how the 10-year old ‘open door’ policy can now be closed. But to carry on enlarging looks like folly – since the end of the Cold War, NATO has tried to avoid confrontation with Russia. But neither does a policy of keeping quiet and doing nothing offer much hope: recent arrivals in

NATO will certainly be looking to the Alliance for what Jonathan Eyal of RUSI calls a 'much clearer and direct commitment to their defence. Collective security will, yet again, be a matter of boots and equipment on the ground, rather than just diplomatic promises.'<sup>vi</sup> Georgia won't be joining soon, but proceedings under the Membership Action Plan (which wasn't offered in April) might well be expanded and will take up much more diplomatic and politico-military time than might previously have been expected. A Georgian MAP could – if presented carefully to Russia – be both a diplomatic face-saving tactic and a delaying tactic. That might be a naïve hope. Perhaps NATO should instead put its diplomatic weight behind expanding EU membership in the south Caucasus – Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia – as a 'westernisation' project which should be less inflammatory for Moscow?<sup>vii</sup>

#### *Article 5.*

Can Article 5 be modified in some way? It's worth remembering that NATO's Article 5 – unlike the Western Union's Brussels Treaty which preceded it by one year – doesn't insist that collective assistance to an attacked ally necessarily be military. But this is splitting hairs, and to be seen to do so would of course damage NATO's credibility considerably. Similarly, if NATO insisted that new members could not bring established disputes (territorial or ethnic) into the alliance, this would scarcely be impressive and would hand over a massive propaganda victory to Russia.

#### *Strategic Concept*

What is NATO actually for? What is NATO's big idea? NATO has for several years been talking about its transformation – but into what? So far, enlargement has been allowed to tell the NATO 'story'. But no longer. Is it enough then, for NATO to talk about what it is doing, in the hope that mere activity will tell the Alliance's story? Probably not – at least judging by the indifferent commitment of some allies to NATO operations in Afghanistan!! When the new US President comes to Strasbourg for NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit next year, what will his 'Transatlantic Declaration' say about NATO that will capture the imagination? Or will he merely give his approval to the beginning of a Strategic Review process to conclude by end 2009?

## Other questions:

### *Bases*

There will be increasing pressure for NATO bases to be established in Eastern European countries. So far NATO has been unwilling to do this (apart from small staging bases established by the US in Romania and Bulgaria, and the missile locations in Poland and the Czech Rep. – not least because there was no apparent need (with no apparent military threat), and no wish to antagonise Russia so overtly. But should NATO really have no military bases in the Baltic Republics, out of respect for Russia?! And even if NATO were to decide on a more expansive basing policy, would this policy have a deterrent effect on Russia, and would Russia accept something like a reduced version of Cold War containment? I suspect not. It would be more likely that a basing programme would simply reinforce the Russian perception of being encircled by NATO. If permanent basing is considered too confrontational, perhaps a more vigorous programme of military exercises in these countries could be considered? Or would this make NATO appear rather timid in the face of Russian objections?

### *Operations*

There is still a great deal of concern regarding NATO's commitment to Afghanistan. NATO's ISAF has c.51,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan, with no few than 70 'national caveats' restricting what can be done with those troops.<sup>viii</sup> Perhaps the promised 'troop surge' will transform NATO's fortunes in Afghanistan? Quite apart from the difficulties in Afghanistan, there is a broader question concerning NATO's scope of operations. Should NATO confine itself to Europe? How far NATO should go beyond its traditional geographical area or its traditional range of activities?

There is another way to look at the operational issue. For some time we've been familiar with the argument that if NATO fails in Afghanistan, the alliance will unravel. So far, of course, many European countries seem to have ignored that argument, judging by their commitment to NATO operations there. Now, with Georgia, attention is to some extent turned back to Europe. This isn't the Cold War central front all over again, but we have to ask whether, if NATO can't present a co-ordinated political-military position in the face of a crisis of this sort so close to home, and still less project much of an operational capability which could be useful in or around Europe, the 60-year old Alliance is indeed in terminal decline.

### *NATO-EU Relations*

NATO's best future is to be a security provider in post-conflict and stabilisation operations. But it is precisely in this sphere that NATO comes across an ever more self-confident European Union. On 22 February 2008 the US Ambassador to NATO – Victoria Nuland – indicated US approval of the development of EU defence: 'An ESDP with only soft power is not enough.'<sup>ix</sup> But since then, several things have happened. Georgia, of course. And the impending global recession which is beginning to indicate that the US might not be all that keen on defence industrial collaboration with Europe, no matter what Ambassador Nuland says about US-European strategic co-operation. And then there's also the French Presidency of the EU, with President Sarkozy's determination to carve out a more distinctive post-Georgia niche for the EU, in some combination of hard and soft power. Consider also that while NATO is rewriting its strategic concept, the EU is also in the process of revising and hardening up the European Security Strategy.

### **Conclusion**

This isn't a new Cold War, but I would argue that the security situation in Europe has changed in important respects in recent weeks. In these circumstances, the balance of advantage should swing in the direction of NATO: if what is required at the moment is a little more politico-military bluntness in Europe's relations with Russia, then I would say that NATO should be better placed than the EU to make that point. But as NATO's big, post-Cold War, European security opportunity has arisen, so its problems have been set in sharper relief than ever. NATO could still snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

NATO's biggest problem is that Russia's contempt for its old adversary is rising fast. President Dmitry Medvedev is reported to have said of NATO's post-Georgia deliberations: 'We are not afraid of anything, including the prospect of a Cold War.'<sup>x</sup> Clearly, NATO needs to do something to redress the balance. But how it does this will matter. Russia will be watching closely, and NATO will have to avoid giving Moscow propaganda ammunition; making it possible for Russia to argue that it is NATO which has slipped back into its Cold War mode, which is the only time the Western Alliance really had any rationale and value.



It's easy to say that NATO needs to reconnect with its values, and become more of a 'political organisation'. But I think there is a prior problem which is altogether more compelling. What NATO needs, in my view, is for European governments to make up their minds about five things:

1. Do European countries wish to contribute to counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations in countries such as Afghanistan?
2. If so, do they wish to join such operations in partnership with the United States – or even to be led by the United States?
3. How do Europeans view Russia: A commercial partner? A fuel bank on which we're increasingly dependent? Or a hostile presence? Can it really be 'business as usual' for Europe now that the Russians have pulled their troops back to territories in Abkhazia and South Georgia? Is it right, or prudent, or timely that there should be talks next month towards a new EU-Russia 'partnership and co-operation agreement'?<sup>xi</sup>
4. However Europeans do view Russia, do they believe they can manage their relations with Russia on their own, European terms? Or is partnership with the United States a good idea?
5. And finally, do Europeans want to have two security and defence institutions working uneasily and inefficiently alongside each other? Or should they concentrate their political, economic and military effort into one such organisation?

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<sup>i</sup> *The Peloponnesian War* (London: Penguin Books, 1954) Book III, para. 11.

<sup>ii</sup> C.P. Cavafy, 'Waiting for the barbarians', trans. E. Keely & P. Sherrard in G. Savidin (ed.), *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>iii</sup> 'Patching up NATO', *The Economist*, 19 November 1994.

<sup>iv</sup> S. Sloan, 'US perspectives on NATO's future', *International Affairs* (71/2, April 1995), p.229.

<sup>v</sup> R.B. McCalla, 'NATO's persistence after the Cold War', *International Organization* (50/3, Summer 1996), p.447.

<sup>vi</sup> Jonathan Eyal, 'A Rude Awakening: European Security and Georgia', *RUSI Newsbrief* (28/9, September 2008), p.75.

<sup>vii</sup> 'After the war', *The Economist*, 18 October 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> 'NATO chief questions political will to win', *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> Quoted in Daniel Keohane, 'The Strategic Rise of EU Defence Policy', *Issues* (EUISS, March 2008).

<sup>x</sup> Quoted in Alexis Crow, 'NATO and Public Diplomacy: The Need for the Alliance to Tell its Own Story', *RUSI Newsbrief* (28/9, September 2008), p.78.

<sup>xi</sup> 'Russia and Europe: too soon to kiss and make up', *The Economist*, 18 October 2008.