

The Current American Political and Intellectual Debate on NATO

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The background

The year following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked an historic turn in NATO's history. With the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Atlantic alliance defeated and outlived the Warsaw Pact but simultaneously lost its *raison d'être*. The identity crisis that followed it's today only partially resolved. The painful but epiphanic experiences of the Nineties pushed NATO from the Cold War to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to the war in Afghanistan, transforming the Alliance and its role in the eyes of the members.

In 2002 the percentage of Europeans who believed that NATO was essential to the security of their country was 69 percent; in 2007 it went down to 53 percent and in 2008 it came up to 57 percent, very close to the 59 percent recorded in the United States in the same year¹. Even if the statistics are getting better, they indicate a widespread disaffection among the "Atlantic public". Moreover, they bluntly reflect the "Atlantic leadership" past and present hesitations about NATO's future and its role in Afghanistan. During the Nineties NATO underwent radical transformations that included its enlargement and the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. The 9/11 terrorist attacks added onto the changes brought about in the previous decade. The application of Article V temporarily revitalized the Alliance and nourished the political and intellectual debate about its future. However, the inability by the "Atlantic leadership" to capitalize on the solidarity that surrounded 9/11 further dented NATO's reputation. The Alliance was asked to intervene in Afghanistan only in 2003, and eventually it did so only with the half-hearted support of most member states.

Which brings us to today. NATO is bogged down in a war that doesn't appear to

¹ *Transatlantic Trends 2006*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Compagnia di San Paolo, Washington, D.C. e Bruxelles, 2006, p. 9 e *Transatlantic Trends 2008*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Compagnia di San Paolo, Washington, D.C. e Bruxelles, 2008, p. 15.

concern most of its European members. 58 percent of Europeans agree that all NATO members have to share the financial costs of the Alliance's military operations. However 79 percent favors NATO's commitment in providing security for economic reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, and only 43 percent supports conducting combat operations against the Taliban. This discrepancy in the perception of NATO's role in Afghanistan reflects the attitudes of the European political elites, which have hardly presented NATO's involvement in the International Stabilization and Assistance Force (ISAF) as a military operation. Indeed, the highest support for combat is registered in the European countries that have contributed the most in militarily terms: the Netherlands (69 percent) and the United Kingdom (64 percent). In the United States the percentage goes up to a stunning 76 percent, a number appropriate to a country that feels at war.

That Americans and Europeans have a radically different perception of NATO emerges clearly in the American political and intellectual debate about the Atlantic alliance. With less than a month left to the 60th NATO anniversary summit in Strasbourg-Kehl, American experts and politicians are struggling to reconcile the expectations that surround a mighty military alliance, with the actual role and responsibilities that its members are willing to take upon themselves. The future of the Alliance is in question, and the issue that receive most attention are Afghanistan and Russia, future enlargements and the appointment of the new Secretary General, closely followed by France's re-entry in the Integrated Military Command after 43 years of absence. It goes without saying that the possible publication at the 60th Anniversary summit of the New Strategic Concept has also attracted interested and sparked debate. However much more qualified speakers have already covered the subject, so I will leave that aside.

Intellectuals on the Right and Politicians on the Left

Intellectual debate in the United States is nurtured by the work of the *think tanks*, independent institutions that conduct research on most public policy issues, and their relationship with the government. When a new Administration takes office, it usually looks at politically friendly think tanks to staff its most important posts and offices. On the other hand, think tanks often offer former Administration officials "a house" to

get back to at the end of a mandate. Currently the most prominent liberal scholars make their voice heard through their official jobs within the Administration. Conservatives, on the other hand, counter-respond from the offices of their think tanks.

It goes without saying that much of the intellectual and political debate of the past three months in the United States has naturally been focused on the economic crisis and its impact on domestic policy. NATO has not been in the headlines. Nevertheless, the Obama's Administration is taking its first steps in the international domain, and naturally only partly in the footprints of the Republican and Democratic Administrations that preceded his.

Immediately after his election to president of the United States, Obama addressed a letter to Secretary General of NATO and the Members of the North Atlantic Council in which he praised NATO's history and called upon it to: "helping the people of Afghanistan build a better future, to helping the people of Europe's South and East as they become fully a part of democratic Europe"². The Strasburg-Kehl summit will be the first time that President Obama's position on NATO will be tested. On some issues we can safely look at history for guidance on what to expect.

Enlargement is one of those. As recently as September 10, 2008 Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) made clear that NATO enlargement is still be a priority of the American government. In a statement released in front of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Senator Lugar emphasized how the extension of NATO membership to countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, Albania and Croatia is vital to extending the zone of peace and security around the Alliance, and is key to ensuring that NATO preserves its role in serving: "the national security interests of its members". Senator Lugar's attitude is indicative of a bipartisan approach to NATO enlargement that dates back to Bill Clinton's presidency and it's echoed without significant exception in the work of conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation or the American Enterprise Institute. According to Ron Asmus, who was deputy assistant secretary of state for European Affairs at the time of the first NATO enlargement, Clinton strongly supported it for three reasons: he believed that it was the best way to stabilize Europe; he thought that the Twentieth Century taught us that preserving Western soli-

² B. Obama, *Letter to NATO*, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2009/s090120a.html> (accessed March 8, 2009)

parity was in the mutual interest of the United States and Europe, and that enlargement was the best way to strengthen the transatlantic relationship; and finally that enlargement was the best way to show the world that America still stood at the center of international policy making as the leader of the international community³. The Obama campaign stump-speech on NATO was clearly rooted in this tradition, supporting NATO enlargement as long: “new candidates for membership are democratic, peaceful, and willing to contribute to our common security”⁴. One can safely assume that the new Administration position on enlargement will not change even if it will be pursued with softer tones to avoid, at least for the moment, a direct confrontation with Russia.

Afghanistan is somewhat a more complex issue, because the Administration’s policy for the country has not yet been revealed. However, one can safely assume winning the war against the Taliban will be a center piece of President Obama’s foreign policy. In a speech delivered on February 7, 2009 at the 45th Munich Security Conference, Vice President Biden stressed that a terrorists-free, stable Afghanistan is one of the United States top foreign policy priorities⁵. While waiting on the outcomes of the strategic review of American policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the new Administration has made clear that victory in Afghanistan is key to its national security and that it will count on NATO to achieve it. On February 17, 2009 President Obama ordered the deployment of another 17.000 troops in Afghanistan. Few days later, on his way to the NATO ministerial meeting in Krakow U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates made clear that NATO member were expected to step up their contributions too: “We will continue to ask the allies to provide even a short term plus up in the forces to provide with security in the pre-election period. There is a requirement out there in terms of the desire to have people sign up for additional troops during that period of time and frankly the response so far has been disappointing”⁶. The Obama Administration will also expect

³ R. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Doors. How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, New York, 2002, p. xxv.

⁴ B. Obama and J. Biden, *A Stronger Partnership with Europe for a Safer America*, http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/Fact_Sheet_Europe_FINAL.pdf (accessed March 9, 2009).

⁵ J. Biden, *Speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference*, Munich, February 7, 2009.

⁶ R. Gates cited in J. Knock – O. Farry, U.S. Administration Wants More Troops from NATO Allies, France 24, February 19, 2009, <http://www.france24.com/en/20090218-obama-approves-deployment-17000-extra-troops-afghanistan> (accessed February 24, 2009).

NATO to provide better help with the civilian side of the war in Afghanistan, including issues such as police training, development, counter-narcotics and for those who have nobody to spare, funds that will finance the Afghan National Army. The final informal meeting of NATO Defense Ministers before the Strasbourg-Khel summit will take place in Prague March 12 and 13, 2009. Much will be discussed, but Gates has already made clear that the United States will expect: "Significant new commitments at the NATO summit"⁷. On this issue the intellectual contribution of conservative think tanks supports the Administration, at least so far. According to Sally McNamara, senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation: "NATO's success or failure in Afghanistan will be a major factor in the defeat or victory of al-Qaeda and its boldness in continuing to pursue global terrorist activities in Europe and America"⁸. Obama must force European allies to come to term with the fact that NATO is at war, thus each member should behave appropriately stepping up financial and military contribution.

On the issues of Russia's relationship with NATO, the Obama Administration is taking cautious steps in a new direction that have stirred a larger debate on the general course of American foreign policy. At Munich Security Conference Vice President Biden refuted the idea that the relationship between NATO and Russia is a zero sum game: "The United States rejects the notion that NATO's gain is Russia's loss, or that Russia's strength is NATO's weakness"⁹. Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after him, called for a re-set in American attitudes towards Russia and hoped for a strengthened cooperation between Moscow and NATO in the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The mood and the tone seemed changed, but the issue at the core of NATO's relationship with Russia from an American perspective have not gone away: the Obama Administration does not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent States, nor is willing to acknowledge Russia's sphere of influence. Moreover, Russia's influence on the decision by the Kyrgyzstan's government to close the Manas Air Base – which is crucial to the American efforts in Afghanistan – has disappointed many in the U.S., including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who has already

⁷ R. Gates cited in J. Garamone, *NATO Ministers Announce More Aid to Afghanistan, Prep for April Summit*, February 20, 2009, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=53171> (accessed February 24, 2009).

⁸ S. McNamara, *Reforming and Revitalizing NATO. A Memo To President-elect Obama*, Washington, D.C., January 6, 2009.

⁹ J. Biden, *Speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference*, cit.

expressed concerned over Russia's ambiguity regarding Afghanistan: "On the one hand [the Russians] are making positive noises about working with us in Afghanistan. On the other hand, they are working against us in terms of that airfield that is clearly important to us". It remains to be seen how far a new U.S.-Russia cooperation can go before NATO will become again a theater of confrontation between Russia's assertiveness and the United States' will. Conservative intellectuals have shown some concern about Obama's conciliatory policy towards Russia and the impact that this might have on the Atlantic alliance. Nile Gardiner, a prominent scholar at the Heritage Foundation, fears that the Administration's approach to Moscow might end up giving Russia a say on NATO enlargement, especially as regards Georgia and Ukraine. Obama's policy towards Russia could prove a blow to NATO, and endanger transatlantic security.

In a similar way, the issue of France re-entry in NATO's Integrated Military Command has been debated in the United States as part of the larger Obama-Clinton's approach to foreign policy. Gone are the "bad manners" of the Bush Administration: Obama values America's allies in Europe and is determined to show it. From the Administration's perspective, France re-entry in NATO would seal the transatlantic rapprochement and set the tone for better relations across the Atlantic. By coming back to NATO, France would indicate that it is willing to abandon its aspiration as a counterweight to the United States. In exchange the Obama Administration is expected to drop American's suspicion of European defense and accept France as a top member of the Atlantic alliance. At Munich the new Administration has made clear that it would welcome France's decision to a full NATO membership. But it has also made clear that with a full membership come bigger responsibilities, possibly in the numbers of troops that France could spare for the ISAF. Conservative intellectuals are suspicious of Obama's overture to France: "These changes would give Paris (and its key ally Berlin) an extraordinary degree of power and influence within the organization [...] Such move would ultimately shift power away from Washington and London and toward continental Europe, undoubtedly paving the way for the development of a Franco-German driven European Union defense identity within NATO"¹⁰. France re-entry into NATO's Integrated Military Command should be supported only if Paris is willing to commit to

¹⁰ N. Gardiner, *Biden's Munich Speech: Obama Administration Foreign Policy Projects Weakness and Confusion*, Web Memo, Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., February 9, 2009.

transatlantic security primarily through the Atlantic alliance, rather than through European defense cooperation.

Finally, there's no "official rumor" yet on who the Administration favors as next NATO Secretary General. Notably, the American press has spent very little time discussing the issue in comparison with the European media. And American think tanks have show no interest whatsoever, perhaps a sign that the post of Secretary General is not considered an "American problem". Questioned after the NATO meeting in Krakow on February 20, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates hoped that the members could reach an agreement in time for the 60th Anniversary Summit and called for a leader: "who has the broadest possible support across the alliance, and, frankly, somebody who has the executive experience to run a very large and complex organization"¹¹. Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark and Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski of Poland are probably at the top of the list of favorites, even if they continue to politely decline any interest for the job. Fogh Rasmussen has been prime minister since 2001. Under his leadership Denmark has been a steady and reliable NATO member: The 700 units-strong Danish contingent in Afghanistan is the largest per capita. Sikorski is young, and its government experience is limited to Poland, but he is an Afghanistan expert and he enjoys the respect and friendship of Zbigniew Brzezinski, a close advisor to President Obama. At this stage of the debate, it is fair to assume that the choice will fall on one of the two.

Conclusions

To conclude: the current intellectual and political debate on NATO in the United States mostly focuses on the future of the Alliance, and specifically on whether it will stay relevant for European and American security or whether it will be sidelined by failure in Afghanistan. Intellectual conservatives and liberal policy makers agree that European members must take NATO commitment in Afghanistan more seriously, and behave appropriately in terms of military and financial engagements.

¹¹ R. Gates, Press Availability with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates following the NATO Meeting in Krakow, Poland, February 20, 2009, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4356> (accessed March 8, 2009)

Enlargement remains a bipartisan pillar of American's approach to NATO, both among politicians and intellectuals. It is fully recognized and supported as a stabilizing force for Europe across the political spectrum.

Conservative intellectuals have shown some concern about President Obama's conciliatory moves towards Russia. Leon Aron, at the American Enterprise Institute thinks that the new Administration is setting itself up for failure. In any case, it remains to be seen how far a new U.S.-Russia cooperation can go before NATO will become again a theater of confrontation between Moscow and Washington, especially vis a vis the prospective of further NATO enlargements.

France re-entry in Integrated Military Command of the Atlantic alliance is somewhat controversial, especially for conservative think tanks, which fear that Paris will operate as a Trojan horse to undermine NATO in favor of European defense. Conversely, the Obama Administration is firmly pursuing France full membership of NATO within the framework of its rapprochement policy towards Europe and support of European defense within NATO.

Finally on the issue of who will be the next NATO Secretary General there has not been much debate in the United States. With less than a month to the 60th Anniversary summit, European intellectuals have done most of the work, and the two most favorite (unofficial) candidates seem to be Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark and Radek Sikorski from Poland.