

Considerations on a new NATO Strategic Concept

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During today's proceedings, references to the "Strategic Concept" have been made time and again. It is therefore appropriate for me to specify, first of all, what sort of document is it. By definition, a Strategic Concept is intended to express the *Grand Strategy* (or, to use the French terminology, la "*Stratégie Générale*") either of a Nation, an Alliance or an Organization, and should therefore include, as specific elements, the views on how the shareholders intend to tackle all the three key subjects, known as the pillars of Strategy, namely the Ends (political aims), the Ways (approaches) and the Means it intends to develop, in their application.

Having said that, it is worth recalling that the present Strategic Concept was endorsed by NATO Chiefs of State and Government in 1999. All in all, it was a sound document, even if it had two remarkable defects. Its first weakness was due to the fact that the definition of the Alliance's Ends (aims) was not straightforward, as NATO could not disentangle itself from the dualism between those Nations keen to consider "collective defense" only, and those willing to focus on crises, thus bringing forward a new "expeditionary" approach to crisis management.

The result was a sort of "Yes, we cherish collective defense, and we must prepare our forces for that. However, as no immediate threat exists, forcing us to envisage a *Large Scale Art. 5* operation in the short term, in the mean time we will focus on *Crisis Response*".

Also, the concept was the product of a stock-taking exercise, carried on to update its predecessor, approved in 1991, by adding what had been experienced in these years. It was, therefore, looking behind, without setting a strategy for the future, which hinged inevitably on a shared aim, as well as an agreed approach on how to tackle the risks and the challenges our Nations were likely to face, in the years to follow.

The first problem, when a backward-looking concept has been issued, is that Organizations cannot prepare themselves beforehand, through a timely development of second level concepts and plans, but must be ready to follow "*visual flight rules*" in re-

acting to what happens, something which was already quite difficult in that Organization, having 16 member states, at that time, with further 3 close to join: most specifically, reaction time risks being long, thus depriving the Alliance itself of the most inexpensive options.

It is known, in fact, that a quick reaction to crises, before they develop and harden, allows the enactment of the so-called “*strategies of limited aim*”, and is, therefore, the cheapest and most effective solution, in many cases. In fact, as a wise man of the past noted, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”¹, something worth keeping in mind, for the future.

In fairness, the resilience of the politico-military bodies of the Alliance proved to be remarkable enough, after 1999, both in the case of FYROM-Macedonia (Operation *ESSENTIAL HARVEST*), where inter-ethnic conflict was effectively prevented, for the second time in a decade, through a limited effort, and when the tragedy of 9/11 occurred, through the deployment of AWACS aircraft in the USA (Operation *EAGLE AS-SIST*) and frigates in the Mediterranean (Operation *ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR*), to thwart possible infiltrations of terrorists, weapons and explosives through the sea. One may deem, therefore, why am I complaining?

Besides the lack of doctrinal preparedness, the concept, due to its defects, did not have the capability to enable the definition of the required set of forces, namely that kind of process whereby forces are planned, generated and trained to cope with the expected situations.

The result has been that Nations, under NATO auspices, continued to prepare themselves for the “big war”, while having to fight a number of “small wars”. The best instance of the inconveniences of this situation, very much resembling the attempt to fix a wristwatch with a big hammer, was the case of Operation *ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR*, where the Navies had to deploy what they had, which was not perfectly fit for the purpose.

In fact, offshore patrol vessels, small submarines and fast attack craft, were limited in numbers, in the national inventories, as NATO had discouraged Nations, during the previous years, and – what is worse - continued to do so, while the operation was

¹ A.T. MAHAN, *Some Neglected Aspects of War*, Ed. Sampson Low etc., 1907, pg. 92.

ongoing, from keeping adequate numbers of these kinds of ships among their force contributions to the Alliance. The only forces available were sophisticated units, extremely manpower-intensive and most expensive to run, and they had therefore to perform the low-intensity tasks of this mission.

The first remark I would like to make, therefore, is that should a new Strategic Concept not be sufficiently forward-looking, NATO would be unable to prepare its forces, in order to cope with the events which presumably face us. To do so, however, a dispassionate examination of the present situation, as well as a look at the most significant trends, is essential.

Unfortunately, there are strong reasons to fear that NATO risks having another backward-looking concept, as the operations in Afghanistan are monopolizing the general attention, and stirring too much emotion, both in NATO HQs and among the public opinion.

It is sad to say, but the operation itself, especially the precipitous drive to the South, before the war-tiredness of the population were visible, marked a sharp discontinuity from the previous NATO prudent approach to crises, which had proven to be highly successful. Most specifically, the decision to send there land forces, while there was a disagreement on the approach to be followed, caused heated discussions, which have not abated yet.

However, now the key strategic centers of gravity of the Afghan situation, its “Schwehrpunkten”, namely to gain the favor of the “bench-sitters” and to turn the time factor against the opposition, by acknowledging the fact that the Afghan Security Forces are the only able to stabilize that Nation; fortunately, these two issues have been sufficiently being dealt with, through the recent agreed policy: we must therefore be patient and wait, to see its effects.

There will be, of course, a lot of “untidy situations”, ridden with small and big troubles, but history tells us that, in these cases, you cannot shorten an inherently long process, as stabilization is, by an increase of troops carrying direct intervention tasks, rather by better enabling the local forces to master the situation more effectively.

The other risk of an exclusive focus on Afghanistan is to forget the flexible and agile approaches followed in the previous years, which showed that NATO was adaptive to the different situations, thus being most effective. To confront the opposition,

through a series of frontal and symmetric engagements, as done there, is known from history to be the less cost-effective option. The fact that we are celebrating, in these months, the 200° Anniversary of the Spanish insurgency against Napoleon should help us reflecting on this point.

The other area where some house-keeping is due is the Partnership structure; the moment is favorable, as, since 1999, most Partner Countries have become members. Apart from special relationships, being already the object of ad-hoc agreements, as it is the case with Russia and Ukraine, two main options are being considered, as far as the other Partners are concerned, and it will be a matter of policy to chose between them, as they both have significant advantages.

The first option is to establish a “variable geometry” structure, with the “*Club of contributors to NATO-led operations*” coming first and then with the other Partners in two-three other groups, designed to host them, depending on the level they have reached through their participation to Partnership programs, as well as to the kind of Partnership they prefer. This would ease the concerns of those participating to operations about exchange of information in the field, while allowing all the others to chose where to stay, in their cooperation with the Alliance.

The second option reflects a geographical approach, so that consultation with Partners, on how to tackle developing crises, might be easier, as it will better take into account the regional peculiarities. The only disadvantage is that such an approach, while being more straightforward, as far as political consultation is concerned, might not fully meet the operational concerns I have just mentioned.

Having said that, it is essential that the main bulk of the concept should focus on the future. To this scope, it is fair to say that a lot of work is already being done so far, both inside the Alliance and among the associated think-tanks, first and foremost by the Atlantic Treaty Associations of the NATO Countries.

The involvement of the latter bodies has been made possible by the need for NATO to wait, until the new US Administration will consolidate its approach to the major international problems, after having tackled the most urgent and indeed burning issues it found upon its arrival in office.

Some among the ideas brought forward, during this process, have been recently presented, by the NATO Secretary General at the annual Security Conference in Mu-

nich, and his speech is a good indication of the prevailing mood in the Alliance, about the concept.

First and foremost, the Secretary General has acknowledged that NATO *core business* has been, during the last 60 years, to “make the Euro-Atlantic area secure, stable and democratic, and must continue to be so in the future”². Such a statement is a reassurance for all NATO member Nations who are strongly committed in asserting again the importance of Art. 5, but also is an indispensable point of departure for defining “the roles the Alliance should play in the XXI Century”³.

On this subject, the Secretary General has also reaffirmed the importance of synergies among International Organizations, with special mention to the EU, the UN – with whom an MOU has been signed recently – and to the African Union. The issue of “Interlocking Institutions” is, in fact, central in allowing the indispensable synergies in the field of action.

The central point made in this speech, however, is “the need not to limit NATO to collective defense, but also to reflect on collective security, as well as on the human dimension of security”⁴. In saying so, the Secretary General has demonstrated all his courage in tackling a thorny issue: many among you know the “*security dilemma*”, whereby the more one Nation feels secure, the more her neighbors will feel unsafe.

That’s why, after having said that, he has added: “NATO, however, should carry the burden of real-life missions only if it can bring an added value, as for Energy Security and Choke Point Control of the energy flow”⁵. Other instances of this prudent approach, as mentioned by him, are Cyber Security – a domain where NATO has achieved a degree of excellence, through the years – and on how to deal with the consequences of the climate change.

Of course, there is no risk of seeing NATO forces involved in re-forestation activities, nor in the fight against desertification, but the *control of the wide spaces*, to monitor all suspicious activities, and to allow Nations to react to the big flows of human trafficking, is something NATO is able to do well, and has already done so during the recent years, both in the air and at sea.

² DE HOOP SCHEFFER, *Speech delivered at Munich Security Conference, 7 February 2009*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Having mentioned what has come to the fore, until now, it is worth elaborating a bit on what else might be essential, to make the strategic concept more complete.

The most important statement to be inserted should be a strong emphasis on the *Transatlantic Link*. Not to do so would be a fatal mistake, especially now that the USA have never been so weak and vulnerable as before. To reaffirm the transatlantic solidarity is therefore essential for the Alliance cohesion, as it thrived for decades, under the umbrella of American military might, and now it is time to show our gratitude for that great help.

Mind you, we in Europe need more the USA than they need us, as we have never been able to recover from stringencies as they do, we do not care enough about applied research, and our bitter divisions have filled thousand of pages in history books!

The second issue, strictly related to the former, has been already highlighted several times, beyond the ocean, and deals with a renewed emphasis on the *Maritime Dimension* of the Alliance: apart from being a way to ease the burden, in that domain, carried out, so far, by the USA on behalf of the other Allies, this would allow an increase of capability to enact the so-called “*Strategies of Limited Aim*”, as done in the 1990s, before the Navies were sharply cut by an excessive enthusiasm for direct interventions.

Among these strategies, it is worth highlighting the role of NATO in Humanitarian Relief interventions, an activity which has always been the key tool to build solid and lasting friendships with the stricken Countries, since the Russian Squadron was the first to deploy to the town of Messina, one hundred years ago, when the earthquake occurred. In the recent years, the Alliance has demonstrated its promptness, both in the case of the cyclone Katrina and in Pakistan, and there are good reasons to reassert its capability in this domain, as an effective instrument of policy.

Last, but absolutely not the least, the NATO reform should receive new emphasis, by finding an equitable and effective “*balance of powers*” inside the Alliance, through a clear decision on which roles each body has to perform. Two are the issues at stake, namely the role and power of the Central Structure, versus the Nations, and the relationship between the Military Command Structure and the Military Representatives of Nations.

Any change, in these domains, if carried out lightly, will upset the present bal-

ance of responsibilities, which has seen, so far, Nations having a very strong politico-military control, not only over the forces they have assigned to the operations, but also on both the NATO internal structure and the military chain of command, through the joint activity of the Atlantic Council and the Military Committee.

As NATO is not a supra-national organization, this issue is extremely sensitive, and is not limited to finding better ways to quickly achieve consensus, in case of urgency: any sort of streamlining should, in fact, be carried out while taking care of avoid any risk of reducing the latter's willingness to commit forces to the Alliance, for fear of losing a sufficient degree of control, and to incur in situations of embarrassment toward both their national public opinions and the international community.

All in all, the steep and bumpy road for a new concept will be the litmus test of the vitality of the Alliance, whose resilience, through the times, has surprised even the most skeptics. Thanks to it, our Nations have prospered and have been able to progress together, in fostering security and peace. It would be a shame, as well as a strategic mistake, to let NATO slipping into the dustbin of history.