

Policy analysis paper

NATO and a new international system in the making

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The Old World system

During the first forty-two years of its existence, the NATO alliance acted out its role as a deterrent and defensive ‘bloc’ within a relatively robust and slow-changing global order, which was essentially bipolar in character. China could arguably be regarded as a third *coming* world power, yet it took China much longer to reap the seeds of its industrial, technological, and military potential.

Fast-forward to the 90ies and Millennial years, and the order is far less cogent, structured or predictable. The speed of change, as well as the velocity of development of information technologies, data flows, trading, air and space-based vehicles, has unequivocally unravelled that Old World. Those developments have equally created new areas of peril, threats levels and multiplied the mutual ‘interaction points’ for (in)security concerns.

Consequentially NATO no longer had the luxury of guarding over the traditional, conventional security known threats. A realm of less familiar, uncharted challenges opened up, coming in at a speed and impact that appears to have an autonomous dynamic.

NATO’s structures, processes, staff, planning, capabilities could no longer make incremental changes to such a pace of reality. The adage goes that in order to anticipate the future, one must act today to shape it. The decision to decommission ACLANT and establish Atlantic Command Transformation as its successor following the 2002 Prague Summit was therefore a sensible step to adapt the Alliance’s structures and capabilities to face the daunting turbulence of security challenges in years and decades to come.

The haunting ghosts of the Gulf wars, Balkan wars, War in Iraq and cracks in the ‘1944-2003(?)’ international order

The trusted principles and legal foundations of the hard-won consensus of 1945 that governed the United Nations took a critical blow due to a change of course by the Clinton administration in the Gulf War, when it abandoned the policy on non-intervention. The move to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi invaders, who had breached the accepted legal maxim of inviolable sovereign borders, led to the dawn of a new set of guidelines replacing the conventional legal-based consensus.

The wars in the Balkans and NATO campaign in Kosovo further amplified those cracks in the ability of the United Nations to cope with and resolve crisis collectively. Even though certain war crimes indeed led to convictions, criticism on NATO's accountability and the hard toll of civilian casualties, weighed down on the overall confidence in international institutions.

The manifest division within the UN (essentially a joint anti-war position by Germany, France and Russia vs. the pro-war group of the United States, United Kingdom and Spain) on endorsing military action against Iraq, accused of violating UN Security Council Resolution 1440, led down an irrevocable path of the existing world order being broken up. When in March 2003 the pro-invasion group of countries under the leadership of the United States decided to issue an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein and launched the invasion leading to a six-year war in Iraq, the essential capacity of the United Nations Security Council as effective collective security system / mechanism, appears to have been wiped out.

As a result of these developments we have entered into a world where politics are still predominantly exercised by supranational institutions and state actors, yet the amount of states maintaining solid faith and abidance to the international body of rules and institutions that have expanded much since 1944 seems locked in a decreasing trend. Therefore three categories have emerged: (a) those states and entities who ignore or renounce the international legal order (think North Korea and Daesh), (b) those who adhere to a conditional or self-interest based *ad hoc* application of international law and rather build relations based on 'transactional' premises, and (c) states and entities who remain (largely) consistent in applying the body of international laws.

Past the projected demise of the old post-1944 international institutions, crafting momentum for new cross-institutional, multinational arrangements

In this intensifying "contested order", the role and relevance of institutions that were erected on the consensus-based ideas and objectives that came forth from the Philadelphia conference on social rights (1944), Bretton Woods (1944) and San Francisco Conference on prohibition of war (1945) requires close attention. Criticism against the effectiveness, democratic legitimacy, mandate and membership configuration of some of those institutions – not in the least the United Nations – has given way to predictions of a steady erosion and projected demise of those international institutions.

The speed and extent of the 'erosion scenario' will depend on a range of factors, such as multilateralism powers recognizing and seizing the momentum for critical reforms or reorganizations required. NATO of course pledged to continue cooperating closely on 'areas of common interest' with the United Nations. However, there is no ironclad guarantee that the UN and its Security

Council will withstand the continued internal crises spurred by continuing decision-making deadlocks (cf. the veto scourge preventing impactful UN action in conflicts like Syria and Yemen), and retain its current size of members and financial budgeting. The scenario's of either constructive reform and survival, institutional reduction (soft erosion) or break-up (fatal erosion) of the United Nations implicate that NATO must plan ahead and foresee flexible adaptations and alternatives for the cooperation with the UN in its future constellation.

Known institutions and organizations mainly based in Geneva, New York and Vienna are likely to continue advocating a strengthening and upholding of International Law principles in the world. Yet in the post-2003 era, a group of Great Power nations and emerging powers, either due to political decision and/or their leaders' statements have demonstrated that their abidance to international law rules is no longer sacrosanct and consistent, but quite depending on their national (security) interests and priorities. This compounds to a serious tension about the validity and 'universal application' of international law. In sum, the world order shifted from a 'duality' of proponents and opponents of that shared set of consensus-based rules to a constellation added with a 'gray' category of state actors who tone down the value and application of international rules – merely supporting and applying those that further national policy lines and interests.

Need for Grand Strategy that doesn't 'expire' during a time of transition

The complexity and unpredictability of the current threatscape and doubtful direction of the global order imply another difficulty to prepare (for) the future: there is a lot of talk about transformation of the NATO alliance ... to what exactly? Its core functions remain essentially the same and the original principles of the Washington Treaty hence need not be re-written, but there is a pressing need for a clever, resilient Grand Strategy adapted to the new order we will be transitioning into. Grand Strategy is a valuable political tradecraft that some scholars claim is waning (or even absent) amongst nation-states with a legacy of practicing it, for example within the European Union. Yet in this era a single organisation does not transit into and shape a new world order overnight, except by exceptional (unilateral) force – a course not in line with NATO's values and democratic processes.

The EU as a political project is also undergoing challenges with its mechanisms and political choices of its members, yet the EU's *external* impact and reputation in the world remains to be overall positively viewed. Considering the high membership overlap between the EU and NATO, their very complementary nature of functions and so-called institutional and functional 'mirroring' of its security and defence structures at the North Atlantic Council / European Council, EEAS (e.g. Military Staff and Military Committee), and Parliament (known as functional isomorphism), strengthening that institutional tandem must stay a core element of NATO's Grand Strategy.

The combined vision, willingness, and determination to improve NATO on all fronts, through purposeful contributions (in terms of preparing and deploying troops, trainings and missions, research, critical physical and networked cyber infrastructures, defence acquisitions) by its Member states, the Partnership for Peace countries, the Mediterranean Dialogue, ICI partners and expanding circle of “global partners” (Afghanistan, Australia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan and Colombia) is essential to keep up momentum and synergies that tap into the Grand Strategy to come. All actions should be weighted in advance to proof-test the feasibility and sustainability of the precepts of such a Grand Strategy.

Making the world order transition robust by leveraging resilience and protection from the ground up

As security risks are not limited to any particular level or area in society anymore, NATO should engage through its Public Diplomacy efforts, Science for Peace and Security Programme, and national coordination initiatives in informing and training the citizens in basic protection techniques and good practices of resilience measures in times of elevated risk and insecurity, and shock / disruptive events. Initiatives as seen with the governments of Finland, Lithuania, and Israel can provide exemplary elements to a comprehensive ‘Citizens and Civil Organisations Resilience and Protection Enhancement’ initiative, spearheaded by a group of NATO Members committing to this initiative. The progress and added value thereof can be proof-tested and operationalized in the field through NATO-led civil-military mission training.

This entail the idea of supporting resilience and protection ‘from the lowest echelons’, a matter which can further reduce current cognitive-emotional ‘distance’ between NATO as an organisation and the ‘everyday person’. possible more inclusive application of authority and power.

The shape of things to come

NATO is and should remain a catalyst defender and promoter of the latter category – regardless of evolutions and fluctuations among its individual members to lean more towards the second group in favor of conditionality or ad hoc application of the vast body and knowledge on international law to shape the global order. There is a need for NATO, through its executive leadership and diplomatic corps, to exert influence on reconciling competing visions of the current and future global order. That process needs to start from within.

The ambition to strive for a European continent - or even Euro-Atlantic area - “whole and free” has been augmented with a steadfast interest to deepen engagement with states in locales further out-of-

area of NATO's current geographical span. Such processes were already happening within the known scope of, for example, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative whose ICI Regional Centre is engaging in training and capacity-building in critical fields like protecting critical energy infrastructure.

Some notable moves in this sense are the opening up of new cooperation channels with Saudi Arabia and Oman, and increasingly closer cooperation with Japan (cf. joint naval exercises in the Baltic Sea) and Georgia (cf. cooperation on naval security in the Black Sea area and training of Georgian Coast Guard). However uncertain the outcome of interactions with new NATO 'interlocutors', the benefits of such entwinements should always be founded on a healthy balance of interests, clarity on *long-term* strategic priorities, and their stance on the application and strengthening of international law.

There is a huge opportunity presented for NATO to shape and bolster new issue-specific alliances with state actors and organizations elsewhere, from Columbia to South Korea and beyond. Building and strengthening ties with the Global South should tap into further issues such as increased democratization, transparency, resilience, Rule of Law, and empowerment of the next generation of global shapers intent to make their country and region more stable secure and prosperous, under applicable rules and improved justice apparatus for instance. This remains as valid for the ongoing programmes of the Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Partnership for Peace, and NATO' Global Partners.

The coming Resource Scramble (and conflicts over them)

The long-term strategic outlook is very worrisome according to predictive studies by authoritative institutions (World Economic Forum, UN Water and WFP, Atlantic Council). As chances of entering a Fragmented World base-case scenario are fairly high, NATO must maximize on reinvigorating multilateralism within a multi-polar constellation (see M. Burrows, *Global Risks 2035: The Search for a New Normal*, 2016). Areas of concern already covered by specialised NATO COE's such as the Energy Security Centre of Excellence and Crisis Management and Disaster Response COE could be complemented with key studies and support programmes focusing on protecting and governing natural resources (water, food production, the natural environment) which will continue to become more scarce. While currently more confined to scientific studies efforts (SPS), there is a dire interest for NATO to get more involved at institutions and fora shaping policies on natural resource governance issue. Because those issues have a lasting security dimension to them. Plugging in NATO's scientific research and modelling capacity, by acquiring observer status or formal representation, this may have positive effects on those institutions who co-shape the needed governance mechanisms in the future world order.

The Arctic region as an emerging zone of opportunities and risks to govern

One particular evolution that cannot be ignored and which will impact on the future shape of the new international system, concerns the growing interest of nations in the Arctic region and the resources which it treasures. As more navigable sea lanes are opening up due to receding ice, it will surge commercial and scientific activity and invite the presence of armed forces of countries (e.g. those represented in the Arctic Council) to 'protect' their interests. While NATO is no direct party in the Arctic though four of its members (Norway, Denmark, Canada and the United States) are, it should determine the shared security risks in that region and – to the extent possible – assist those four members to support and strengthen international regulations and mechanisms in the context of deterrence, conflict prevention, arbitration through widely accepted proceedings (UNCLOS) and dispute settlement bodies (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea). Voicing support for and reinvigorating an international rules-based approach for (security in) the Arctic region dovetails well with NATO values and principles.

Particularly considering the rising naval activity and (military) communication and intelligence infrastructure projects pursued by Russia, the element of deterrence and avoiding confrontation in the Arctic will nonetheless press itself on the NATO agenda soon. NATO should make efforts to gather further support to prohibit the build-up of permanent military capacities (in particular strategic and tactical nuclear assets) in the Arctic and enhance maritime domain awareness (surveillance) to assess critical threats of nuclear submarines posing a threat to NATO members.

Regional “Capacitator” programmes, infrastructures and leading institutions and leadership

Persistent elements of instability troubling Middle East countries, the often tense and easily inflammable dynamic between Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States and Russia there, make it practically unfeasible for NATO to gain acceptance to all parties as a benevolent reconciler. Given that Turkey and the United States are NATO members, questions on impartiality will emerge by other key actors in the region anyways. Nevertheless, NATO should keep its channels open and advocate the strengthening and (re)acceptance of International Law, also the International Law of Armed Conflict in the Mediterranean Dialogue.

Shaping the future through advanced capacity-building remains a very important objective, especially in and near the so-called known ‘Arc(s) of Instability’ on Europe’s periphery, but also in the Asia-Pacific and other areas. Capacity-building is not a one-way street and requires NATO’s constant watchfulness to ensure that the degree and effectiveness of cooperation won’t be subject to

contravening changes in the partner's national policy agenda which, as stated before, could entail selective application of international rules or clash with NATO's shared values. In terms of capacity-building, NATO must balance pragmatism and focus on measurable progress without risking that decisions or statements by its partners critically stymie progress, upend investments made, or jeopardize the envisioned outcomes.

Investing in sustainable regional security 'capacitators' is and should remain a long-term objective of NATO's engagement through joint forward planning, training, exercises and win-win support programmes with potential Global Partners, among which in the Global South. The accreditation of Colombia as NATO partner, that entered into force in May 2018, gave NATO the unique opportunity to positively affect the regional security complex in Latin America, and secure support from Colombia in security domains that affect Euro-Atlantic security (organized crime, maritime security, terrorism, cyber). Every single partner relation implies a huge effort to keep up interest, commitment, and level of (perceived) returned benefits. Measuring the results will be a means to legitimize the partnership and keep support up. Also fully capitalizing on NATO's unique (scientific) knowledge, operational experience, and technological base, are highly valuable devices for NATO's attractiveness and global image for future Global Partners.

NATO's success to co-shape the transition to a future world order will depend on many factors, some of which are hard or even impossible to control. Yet much opportunity to make the world more secure can be reaped by expanding the scope, and effectiveness to prepare and coordinate with reliable Global Partners. Partners who see more benefit by staying on a consistent, focused cooperative multilateral course together with NATO rather than give in to fickle, inward-turning political agenda's that run opposite to NATO's core values and principles. Making those states and entities more immune to forces of domestic nationalism, protectionism, sectarianism or factionalism (divisive blocs) and nourishing their potential for strengthened long-term capacity-building, is an important step to tone down the chances of the coming international order devolving into greater threats and levels of insecurity.

Nourishing NATO values and principles, gaining strong appeal to international rulemaking, and embedding these in genuine leadership-building initiatives is key to co-shape a world system governed by strong, legitimate, responsible 'transformational' leaders who advance their societies.