NATO after Prague: Learning the Lessons of 9/11

Michael Rühle

NATO after Prague:
Learning the Lessons of 9/11

MICHAEL RÜHLE

It would be an understatement to note that the last months have not been kind to the transatlantic relationship. When Iraq moved to the front burner, the transatlantic community was forced to tackle an issue that threatened to overwhelm it. As a result, the spirit of transatlantic solidarity, which was so impressively displayed after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, has faded rapidly. The United States is disappointed with what it sees as only qualified European support for the war on terror, and it scoffs at European military weakness. Many Europeans, in turn, are disappointed about what they perceive as a US fixation on military responses, and they resent the US approach of casually lumping together the war on terror with issues such as weapons of mass destruction or regime change in Iraq.

NATO, the manifestation of the transatlantic security relationship, could never have remained unaffected by such discord. Although the real debate on Iraq was played out in the halls of the United Nations, and although NATO was not expected to play a direct role in a war on Iraq, sooner or later the Atlantic Alliance was bound to be hit by this debate. In February 2003, a short but agonizing disagreement erupted over the timing of planning for the defense of Turkey in case of war on Iraq. Only a few Allies held the view that the initiation of NATO's planning should be made contingent on further developments in the United Nations, yet for almost two weeks, NATO appeared to be blocked. That the disagreement was indeed one over timing, and not over substance, helped to bring the crisis to an end before any permanent damage was done. As NATO's Secretary General, Lord Robertson, put it in his personal account of the crisis, the Alliance had taken a hit above, not below, the waterline.

The short crisis within NATO, as well as the protracted crisis over Iraq, demonstrated that the Atlantic community has not yet fully adjusted to the post-9/11 security environment—in either political or institutional terms. However,

one ought to resist the temptation to judge a long-term, strategic Alliance by short-term tactical tests. The current focus on Iraq and its discontents obscures the fact that NATO has embarked on a process of post-9/11 adaptation that will help bridge the enormous divides within Europe and across the Atlantic that the Iraq crisis has exposed.

The New Transatlantic Debate: 1990 Revisited

Today's transatlantic security debate is, in essence, the debate that did not take place a little over a decade ago, when the Cold War ended. Back then, a fundamental discussion about the future shape of the transatlantic relationship seemed inevitable. But it was put off. There was simply too much unfinished business left over from the Cold War. The transatlantic community could not afford to divert its attention away from the task it still faced together: the task of cleaning up the mess left by the Cold War. That entailed significant challenges:

- To embrace the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, who were craving their share of Europe, including its Atlantic dimension in NATO.
- To associate a Russia that, in a sense, was both an old empire and a new state, still unsure of its European vocation.
- And to address the conflicts in the Balkans, which were making a mockery of the idea of Europe as a zone of peace and shared values.

Meeting these challenges required Europe and North America to work together. Accordingly, NATO reached out to Central and Eastern Europe, through its policy of partnership and through NATO enlargement. The Alliance also played a major role in associating Russia to NATO and, thus, to the emerging new Europe. And NATO played a key role in pacifying the Balkans through its military engagement.

However, this impressive display of transatlantic unity could not hide the fact that eventually the relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic was bound to change in the longer run. As early as 1991, the Gulf War raised the question of whether NATO was still in line with the US security agenda after the Cold War. In that conflict, which was taking place "out of area" and fought by a "coalition of the willing," NATO played only a supporting role. Also in the early 1990s, the European Union (EU) started to articulate an ambition to become a military actor in its own right, raising the question of NATO's future. And the initial ambi-

> ***"The Atlantic community has not yet fully adjusted to the post-9/11 security environment."***

guity by the United States regarding humanitarian intervention in the Balkans signaled a profound uncertainty about how the United States viewed its own future role on the European continent. And still, despite these changes, a major debate about the future of transatlantic relations did not occur. Those on both sides of the Atlantic did not want it to occur. And they did well by dodging it—and by keeping their eye on the European ball.

The New Security Environment: Pushing NATO to the Fringes?

After 11 September 2001, however, a fundamental debate about the future transatlantic security relationship could not be dodged any longer. The changes in the international security environment had become too fundamental to allow for business as usual. Both the transatlantic relationship in general and NATO in particular have had to adapt to the realization that the immediate post-Cold War period has ended and a new, still undefined era has begun. Three changes, in particular, stand out:

● The first change concerns the new threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. These threats emerge from outside of Europe. Naturally, they draw US attention away from the Old Continent, toward Central Asia and the Middle East. A focus away from Europe, however, also means a focus away from NATO, an institution that is critically dependent on US leadership.

● The second change concerns the strategies with which to respond to the new threats. Simply put, an effective response might require a different team and a different approach than NATO is able to provide. Afghanistan was the first glimpse of that option. Also, NATO might be sidelined by ad hoc coalitions of states more able and perhaps even more willing than the old NATO fogies. Furthermore, NATO might also be sidetracked because of the perception that its consensual decisionmaking culture is too slow and cumbersome to deliver results in time.

● The third change concerns the military capabilities required to respond to the new threats. Rapid response, force projection, and protection against weapons of mass destruction are at a premium—precisely the areas in which the United States is increasingly strong and where Europe's Cold War legacy forces are weak. As a result, US unilateralist impulses are strengthened, and Europeans see whatever influence they hoped to exert on Washington drifting away down the Potomac.

In short, by 12 September 2001, a new debate about the future of the transatlantic security relationship had become inevitable. Dodging it again, as was done in the early 1990s, would not work, not least since Europe today appears "settled." NATO had to face the debate head-on, even if this meant, to use John Foster Dulles's term, an "agonizing reappraisal" of the value of this 54-year Alliance.

Continuities: The Enduring Transatlantic Connection

Despite the fundamental need for change, NATO could take on this reexamination of its internal relationships with considerable self-confidence. After all, 9/11 did not change everything. Despite some American claims that Europe was "fading slowly in the US rearview mirror," there is a transatlantic connection that has become too firmly entrenched to be easily jettisoned.

First, European stability remains a key US strategic interest. The consolidation of Europe as an undivided, democratic, and market-oriented space remains a major objective of US security policy. Only in NATO, the central legitimizing framework for US power in Europe, can the United States play an undisputed leadership role in advancing this strategic objective. Thus, the United States is not likely to surrender this role. Indeed, many US critics of Europe have yet to grasp the fact that both NATO enlargement and the war on terrorism have actually increased the United States' immersion in European security affairs. Consequently, there is no serious political force in the United States advocating a withdrawal from Europe.

Second, Europeans remain the key strategic allies for the United States. This statement does not exclude a stronger US focus on other regions, nor is it contradicted by the emergence of much wider "coalitions of the willing" along the model provided by the Afghanistan campaign. Europe's military capabilities lag behind the United States, yet on a global scale, Europe ranks No. 2 militarily. Moreover, although the debate preceding the war against Iraq may have suggested otherwise, it is only in Europe where the United States finds a milieu of countries predisposed to working with the United States. In Asia, by contrast, the United States will have to continue to rely on bilateral relationships with politically and culturally very different countries. In short, if the United States wants to remain the world's predominant power, it will have to remain a "European power" as well.

Third, the United States remains Europe's most important ally. The United States continues to play a unique role within the transatlantic relationship, as a political crisis manager as well as a military coalition-builder, both within Europe (e.g., the Balkans) and beyond (e.g., the Persian Gulf). This unique US role is widely accepted by the Europeans, notwithstanding ritualistic European criticism of US arrogance or heavy-handedness. As in the United States, there is currently no serious political force in Europe that would advocate a US withdrawal from the continent. On the contrary, with Central and Eastern Europe rejoining the Atlantic community of nations through the enlargement of NATO, the number of countries arguing for a strong US role in Europe has only increased.

Marrying Continuity with Change:
Three Directions of NATO's Reform

If the above changes and continuities are taken into account, a fairly clear picture emerges of three major directions for NATO's reform. First, NATO must find a new balance between addressing its traditional, Euro-centric missions and tackling the new global threats, such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Second, it must acquire the military capabilities to fulfill its new missions. And, finally, it must learn to react quickly and flexibly to new challenges.

The Prague Summit, scheduled for November 2002, was becoming NATO's key opportunity to deliver on all three counts. Initially billed as an "Enlargement Summit," the idea of making the admission of new members the sole focus of the meeting was dropped after 9/11. All the Allies agreed that NATO enlargement would be a historic step, consolidating Europe as a single security space from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, and from the Baltics to the Balkans. There were widespread fears, however, that the United States might lose interest in the Alliance if the Prague meeting did no more than issue membership invitations. Accordingly, the Prague Summit was relabeled a "Transformation Summit."

NATO's New Missions and the End of the "Out-of-Area" Syndrome

The first fundamental change alluded to above is for NATO to adopt new roles in countering terrorism and dealing with weapons of mass destruction. This is an imperative driven as much by NATO's survival instincts as by the changing strategic environment. If NATO were unable or unwilling to play such a role, it would become completely detached from the US security agenda. This would not only seal NATO's fate as a vibrant institution, it also would deprive the transatlantic community of a major "transmission belt" for ironing out differences on other issues. And, above all, it would condemn to the fringes what is still the world's most effective facilitator of military coalitions.

Even before the Prague Summit, a NATO role in combating terrorism was being defined by two unprecedented events. The first was the invocation of Article 5 on 12 September 2001. By agreeing that a terrorist attack by a non-state actor should trigger NATO's collective self-defense obligation, the Alliance in effect mandated itself to make combating terrorism an enduring NATO mission. This broadening of the meaning of collective self-defense was complemented by a second precedent: the deployment of forces from many NATO nations to Afghanistan. This marked the de facto end of NATO's out-of-area debate, which, as the French NATO Ambassador put it cogently, had collapsed with the Twin Towers.

The Prague Summit further defined NATO's role in combating terrorism with the development of a military concept against terrorism, specific military capabilities to implement this new mission, agreement on a Partnership Action Plan against terrorism, and a stated willingness to act in support of the international community. Prague's definition of NATO as a focal point of any multinational military response to terrorism was given considerable credibility with the agreement

to provide Germany and the Netherlands with NATO planning and support as they assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) III in Afghanistan. The emerging discussion on whether NATO itself should take command of ISAF indicates that this evolution has significant potential to move NATO into a new role outside the traditional Euro-Atlantic area.

A similar approach was taken with respect to the threat posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. Before 9/11, NATO's efforts to counter this threat appeared to be something of an afterthought. Non-US Allies had had reservations about giving prominence to this issue, but accepted it as an agenda item in part to accommodate the United States. The Prague Summit presented an entirely different picture. The various initiatives on nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapon defenses signaled a much stronger transatlantic consensus on the need to cope with this challenge. Technically, these initiatives, which range from enhanced detection capabilities to developing a Prototype Deployable NBC Analytical Laboratory, may not look spectacular. But their immediate significance lies in the political realm. They indicate a heightened awareness of a common threat, and a determination to not let the issue of weapons of mass destruction become a major transatlantic fault line. This was underscored further with the agreement to begin a new NATO Missile Defense feasibility study to examine options for protecting Alliance territory, forces, and population centers against the full range of missile threats.

These decisions taken preceding and at the Prague Summit put NATO firmly back on track. By claiming a distinct role in combating terrorism, and by giving much more prominence to issues related to weapons of mass destruction, NATO has recalibrated its agenda in line with both the emerging strategic environment post-9/11, and with the two dominant US security concerns.

NATO's Military Reform: Bridging the Capabilities Gap

The second major element of NATO's reform is in its overall military capabilities. For the past several years, the priority within the Alliance has been to improve the "European pillar." This process was based on the need to give Europe more military clout to look after its own backyard. Implicitly, it was also based on the eventual diminishing of the US role in future European crisis management scenarios. As 9/11 and the Afghanistan campaign demonstrated, however, "Europeanisation" is not enough to ensure transatlantic security. The events since 9/11 demonstrate beyond a doubt that a European priority must remain the ability to cooperate militarily with the United States.

This does not diminish the strategic rationale for a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) within the European Union. Yet for the EU countries to concentrate solely on acquiring autonomous capabilities means necessarily to concentrate on acquiring capabilities for low- and medium-intensity conflicts. This would lead to a division of labor which neither side of the Atlantic wants, whereby the United States does the fighting and the Europeans "do the dishes," as a

French observer once put it. This would be politically unsustainable, both across the Atlantic as well as within the European Union. Some EU nations will always want to fight alongside the United States, thereby exerting more influence on US strategy (and perhaps sparing themselves the "dishes" part, too). In short, Europe must look beyond ESDP and try to keep apace with the United States.

The Prague Summit made it very clear that this rationale has been understood. In line with the requirement to enhance NATO's ability for power projection, the Alliance set in train a reform of its command structure, which will result in more functionally oriented commands. Another significant summit decision was the adoption of the US proposal to create a NATO Response Force. Not only did it signal NATO's willingness to adapt in line with the requirement for more rapid military action, it is also a catalyst to help Europeans accelerate their force transformation, and a sign of a continued US willingness to view the Alliance as an important military tool.

The key summit achievement in this respect, however, may well have been the Prague Capabilities Commitment. Individual Allies made specific political commitments to improve their capabilities in areas key to modern military operations. Once fully implemented, these commitments would quadruple the number of outsize aircraft in Europe; establish a pool of air-to-air refueling aircraft until additional new tankers will be available; ensure that most of NATO's deployable high-readiness forces will have chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear defense equipment; and significantly increase the non-US stocks of air-delivered, precision-guided munitions.

These commitments mark a turning point in transforming the defense capabilities of the non-US Allies. If nations stick to these commitments, both NATO and the EU will have made a major step forward toward meeting 21st-century requirements. Failure to implement these decisions, however, would deal a major blow to the transatlantic relationship, as it would confirm lingering American doubts about the seriousness of their European Allies. It also would represent a serious setback for Europe itself, by casting a dark shadow over the future of the European Security and Defense Policy. For all these reasons, the Prague Capabilities Commitment must succeed.

NATO's Internal Reform: Toward a More Streamlined Organization

The third area of Alliance reform concerns the organization itself. NATO's working methods must reflect the requirements imposed by the new strategic environment. Although the Alliance will soon have 26 members, the organization's working methods have remained largely unchanged from those developed in the early 1950s for an Alliance of 12. Even if American charges that the Kosovo campaign was "war by committee" were an urban myth, the need for change is still clear. As NATO is enlarging both its membership and its mandate, its working methods cannot be left unaffected. In a nutshell, NATO needs to be less bureaucratic and more flexible.

"Irrespective of disagreements on individual issues, working together remains the preferred option for both sides of the Atlantic."

Almost unnoticed by the broader public, the Prague Summit made a strong start in this direction. Heads of state and government agreed to reduce the numbers of NATO committees (currently 467) by 30 percent. More decisions will be pushed toward subordinate committees, leaving the North Atlantic Council room to discuss strategic issues. The procedures for ministerial meetings have been streamlined as well, sacrificing formality in order to gain time for more substantive exchanges. Over time, these changes should lead to a different working culture within the Alliance.

But more changes may be waiting further down the road. For example, one could foresee arrangements whereby troop contributing nations run an operation and decide on the targeting, while the North Atlantic Council confines itself to providing overall strategic guidance. This model, which resembles the EU's "committee of contributors," may be seen by some as an assault on the cherished rule of consensus. But it need not be. Clearly, a shift to "majority voting" in NATO remains out of the question. The requirement for consensus not only generates pressure to seek compromise, it also provides countries with the emergency brake of a veto—an option that reassures particularly smaller countries that they cannot be steamrolled into submission by the bigger Allies. However, a modification of NATO's working culture that includes the possibility of setting up flexible coalitions, or that includes the possibility of "constructive abstention" appears not only feasible, but indispensable.

In a similar vein, the idea of NATO acting on occasion as a toolbox, i.e. as a pool from which to provide coalitions of the willing with specific capabilities, is here to stay. Even if the notion of a toolbox-Alliance does indeed run counter to NATO's self-perception as a cohesive, all-for-one and one-for-all organization, resisting it may turn out to be futile. Rather than fighting against this concept, the time may have come to look at how a toolbox approach can be reconciled with the continuing need for political cohesion. NATO's long-stated willingness to support the European Union in crisis management is an illustration of how well this can work—because an EU drawing on NATO assets is little else but a coalition of the willing drawing on the NATO toolbox.

A NATO thus streamlined could deliver a range of capabilities to deal with a range of challenges. Even on the issue of preemption, which requires rapid

decision-taking on a potentially controversial case, one should not assume *a priori* that NATO would be too clumsy to deliver. The more the Allies absorb the full implications of the new strategic environment, the more they may see a need for quick responses. This is not to belittle the legal difficulties surrounding any strategy that might involve preemption. But these difficulties largely stem from the fact that the current international legal system was not built to deal with scenarios of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction. Over time, this may change. Moreover, as the Allies have demonstrated in their Kosovo campaign, they are perfectly able to act in a legal gray area—and take the heat for it—if the alternatives to action appear worse.

Conclusion: Unfinished Business, but . . .

NATO's role in the aftermath of 9/11 was hampered by three interrelated dilemmas. First, there was no full-fledged consensus on how to tackle the new threats. Second, the United States felt that the Europeans simply did not possess enough useful capabilities to warrant going through NATO in order to round them up. And, finally, some in Washington saw NATO as an organization much too tedious and cumbersome to subject American policy to it.

A little more than a year after 9/11, the Prague Summit in November 2002 demonstrated that NATO was assimilating the lessons of the attacks and their aftermath. The Alliance demonstrated an emerging transatlantic consensus on how to tackle the new threats; it set in train a process that should result in more relevant European capabilities; and it initiated a wide-ranging reform of NATO's working methods. The organization had displayed that it could handle a steep learning curve.

As with any summit, the meeting in Prague could never be expected to resolve all the Alliance's problems. The subsequent crisis over Iraq has demonstrated that the transatlantic relationship suffers from structural dilemmas that cannot be overcome simply by institutional fixes. For example, much of the transatlantic divergence on Iraq stemmed from the simple but powerful fact that since 9/11 the United States has been psychologically at war, whereas Europe has not. Thus, Americans and Europeans will almost certainly continue to argue over the origins of, and the response to, terrorism. Nor will there be complete convergence in threat perceptions regarding weapons of mass destruction. The Europeans share neither the US urgency to act against "axis of evil" proliferants, nor do they share the American proclivity to write off deterrence as unworkable. And asymmetries in military capabilities will remain, even if the Europeans fulfill their Prague Capabilities Commitment pledges to the letter.

The Prague Summit was nonetheless highly significant. It sent a clear signal that irrespective of disagreements on individual issues, working together remains the preferred option for both sides of the Atlantic. As the transatlantic relationship enters another period of fundamental transition, NATO's Prague Summit demonstrated that the institutional underpinnings of this relationship are still solid. ❏