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NATO Matters

Ensuring the Value of the Alliance for the United States

POLICY BRIEF



By Jacob Stokes and Nora Bensahel

Since its founding in 1949, NATO has served as the cornerstone of the transatlantic alliance, anchoring both military and political cooperation among its members. Today, however, the international security environment is changing rapidly. The strategic malaise afflicting the alliance in the immediate post-Cold War period was in large part papered over by the wars in Kosovo, then Afghanistan and, for a brief time, Libya. With those conflicts winding down, NATO faces another deep crisis: shrinking European defense budgets are stressing American support for the alliance. At a time when U.S. defense budgets are declining – perhaps dramatically, if sequestration is fully implemented – many Americans believe that the United States continues to carry a disproportionate burden for the alliance. This policy brief recommends ways to improve NATO capabilities and to maintain support for the alliance among U.S. policymakers and the public.

Current Defense Dynamics in the United States

Two ongoing trends will affect the level of focus and resources that the United States devotes to Europe and transatlantic issues: a significant decline in U.S. defense spending and the “rebalance” or “pivot” to the Pacific. Together they mark the biggest change in U.S. defense priorities in more than a decade. America’s future role in the alliance will be profoundly affected by these major U.S. shifts.

The U.S. defense budget increased rapidly in the decade after the 9/11 attacks. The base budget alone grew about 40 percent in real terms from 2001 to 2012,¹ with close to \$2 trillion in additional war spending layered on top.² Now, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down and facing strong fiscal pressures, the U.S. defense budget faces a decade of major cutbacks that will dramatically re-shape the entire U.S. defense establishment. The sequestration cuts required by the 2011 Budget Control Act (BCA) will total almost \$1 trillion over the next 10 years. Current political dynamics make it very unlikely that Congress will repeal that law any time soon, and defense issues will continue to be overshadowed by the broader debate over government spending and the U.S. national debt.

Already the total U.S. defense budget – base spending plus war spending – has declined 21 percent,

adjusting for inflation, from its peak in 2010. If the BCA remains in effect through 2021, its final year, and war spending winds down by that time, the defense budget will have fallen by 33 percent in real terms.³ Because of the structure of the BCA, defense cuts will be deeper in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014⁴ than in any other year during the 10-year period. Deep cuts to modernization and procurement accounts are therefore likely, since these are among the very few budgets lines where savings can be realized quickly.

These cuts raise a critical question that the Department of Defense (DOD) identified in the recent Strategic Choices and Management Review, but did not answer: How heavily should DOD keep investing in today's force, versus taking greater risk now while shifting investment toward future capabilities?⁵ This will be one of the crucial questions for the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review, which will be released in February 2014. Prioritizing future capabilities will require significant cuts to current U.S. force structure, end strength and readiness – all of which will increase calls for more equitable burden-sharing within the alliance. Moreover, the relevance and utility of remaining U.S. headquarters, bases and forces in Europe will be exposed to even more critical scrutiny.

The second trend is the U.S. policy of rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific region. That policy, which was announced in November 2011, centers on political and economic issues, but has a significant defense component as well.⁶ For example, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced last year that 60 percent of U.S. naval forces will be focused on the Asia-Pacific region by 2020 (up from about 50 percent today).⁷ That suggests that a smaller percentage of the already-shrinking U.S. forces will be available to cover the rest of the world, including the volatile Middle East.

These two trends mean that fewer units may be available to train and exercise with the NATO allies, although the U.S. Army is committed to maintaining a rotational exercise program to substitute for forward-stationed troops. Other troops will continue to deploy from bases in the United States and elsewhere into Europe for periodic training and partnership exercises. Moreover, the United States has agreed to contribute a U.S.-based Army brigade to the NATO Response Force for the first time as a signal of sustained U.S. commitment.⁸

The European forward presence of hundreds of thousands of troops during the Cold War has already shrunk to tens of thousands or less, partly due to changing threat perceptions.⁹ Yet given budget pressures on Congress to reduce U.S. domestic bases to save dollars, even this modest basing footprint for U.S. forces in Europe will remain under constant pressure to shrink. Over time, this dynamic could make it hard for the U.S. Army to retain its present two brigade combat teams in Europe, which would make it even more difficult for U.S. forces to train and exercise with NATO.¹⁰ Air and naval assets based in Europe and the Mediterranean could likewise be affected.¹¹

U.S. Perceptions of Defense Spending and NATO

Making the case to U.S. policymakers and the public for the enduring value of the NATO alliance requires understanding how Americans see their role in the world today. It also demands a nuanced view of how the U.S. public currently sees the role of alliances and defense spending. There is no consensus today among the American people about the proper size of the defense budget. In a Gallup poll conducted earlier this year, 26 percent of those surveyed said that the government is spending too little on national defense and the military; 35 percent said the government is spending too much; and 36 percent said that the government is spending about the right amount.¹²

More broadly, the American people do want the United States to be an active global power, but they are dissatisfied with the way that the United States plays that role. In a series of polls taken during the past five years, between 66 percent and 75 percent of those surveyed said that the United States should take the leading role or a major role in world affairs. Yet consistent majorities also said that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the role the United States plays in world affairs (between 50 and 56 percent during the same time period).¹³

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A majority of Americans still support NATO. Fifty-five percent see the alliance as “still essential” to U.S. security, a number that has held more or less steady since 2002.¹⁴ The vast majority of the American people continue to believe that the United States should defend the security of its allies. In 2013, 60 percent of those surveyed said that this was a very important foreign policy goal of the United States and an additional 34 percent said it was an important goal, for a total of 94 percent. These numbers have remained virtually unchanged since 2008 (57 percent and 35 percent respectively, for a total of 92 percent).¹⁵

While these indicators demonstrate general public support for NATO, the reality is that most Americans do not have a strong view about NATO one way or another. The level of knowledge about NATO remains extremely low, fostering a broad ambivalence among the public. For example, even

among foreign policy specialists, few know that a four-star NATO headquarters is located in the United States.¹⁶ More important, though, is that for those who do know about NATO, views of the alliance generally focus on a lack of burden-sharing among the partners.

The mission in Libya in 2011 provides an illustrative example. For alliance specialists, that mission constituted a modest success in terms of drawing on existing capabilities and showing NATO’s practical utility to policymakers. Some argue that all the capability gaps the mission laid bare were previously known. However, for many Americans, and for many in the defense community as well, the mission in Libya also represented a cautionary tale about burden-sharing, or more accurately, the lack thereof. Much of the coverage focused on the lack of capabilities – and thus the operational staying power – among the European allies. Knowing about capabilities gaps does not make those shortfalls any less painful when it comes time to fight. While some viewed Libya as a “new model” for U.S. intervention where the United States plays an enabling role for its allies, such a model can only work the extent that allies have capabilities for the United States to enable.

Improving NATO’s Military Capabilities

NATO should focus on improving critical capabilities that give the alliance continued military capacity. The following actions can help ensure that NATO remains relevant and effective, while fostering a more useful debate about contributions to the alliance.

- **Preserve the command and control (C2) interoperability gained in Afghanistan.** Fully networked C2 systems underlie all 21st-century military operations. After more than a decade in Afghanistan, C2 within the alliance is better than it has ever been – but interoperability is highly perishable.¹⁷ Preserving those capabilities will

require a regular exercise program and sustained technological investments. NATO's C2 interoperability also serves a role beyond the alliance. The United States depends on the C2 interoperability that NATO provides for virtually every multinational military operation, whether it involves the NATO command structure or not. C2 interoperability is the most critical task for the alliance – a “foundational task” – that will be the biggest benefit to the United States in the coming decades.

- **Ensure a robust annual exercise program to test key alliance capabilities.** Robust exercises – at sea, in the air and on the ground – are the *sine qua non* of combat readiness. Effective training meshing the alliance's national military forces in both field and virtual exercises are essential to guarantee military interoperability across the alliance, especially after combat operations end in Afghanistan. Europe continues to have some of the most advanced training ranges and facilities in the world, a legacy of Cold War NATO investments. Reinvigorating an annual exercise program could incentivize demanding training standards among NATO nations similar to the ways the Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) exercises did on a massive scale at the height of the Cold War.¹⁸ Such an exercise program would focus alliance military investment and training by maintaining clear, achievable standards that all NATO members would be expected to meet.¹⁹
- **Expand the two-percent metric to include more qualitative assessments of contributions.** In 2006, alliance members recommitted to their long-standing goal of spending two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense.²⁰ However, member commitment to that target continues to falter, with the United States left bearing much of the burden. The United States finances nearly 75 percent of NATO's military spending today, up from 63 percent in

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2001. Of NATO's 28 members, only four countries – Estonia, Greece, the United Kingdom and the United States – met that 2 percent goal in 2012 (down from five countries in 2007).²¹ The imbalance continues to result in recriminations across the Atlantic and within the alliance.²² GDP, however, is a poor indicator of how much defense capability any individual member state can contribute to alliance missions.²³ NATO should focus instead on ways that the allies can get more capability for the money that they do spend. Being able to bring capability to bear in operations makes the difference when it comes time to fight, and nations that can deliver that capability while spending less money should see some benefit.

- **Encourage specialization within regional clusters, rather than across the entire alliance.** The alliance's Smart Defence Initiative aims to facilitate role specialization within NATO so alliance member capabilities are complementary, as opposed to being duplicative while leaving critical capability holes.²⁴ NATO can achieve progress towards that goal without a formal plan by encouraging the creation of regional clusters based on common interests. Such an initiative will allow groups with a history of cooperation to build shared capabilities in areas where they have common interests. For example, the Nordic countries have greatly increased their defense cooperation since 2007, including establishing a formal organization, adopting some joint procurement processes and increasing shared capabilities in a number of areas, such as tactical

airlift.²⁵ Other possible regional groupings include the United Kingdom and France, and the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).

- **Revitalize the military officer exchange program.** Traditional officer exchanges have declined during the past decade due to ongoing military operations, but the United States and other NATO nations should reinvigorate this proven program as combat operations in Afghanistan end. This program could extend beyond placing liaison officers among the member states' militaries, and include a more robust exchange where NATO officers assume the full-time command or staff duties of their counterparts. In addition to exchanges, a strengthened International Military Education and Training program should seek opportunities to foster partnerships with officers from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Asian countries. With a relatively minimal investment, NATO can play a key role in training military officers who adhere to international standards of military behavior and law. Relationships built from these exchanges have immense potential as a long-term, positive influence among the future senior military leaders of emerging states.
- **Emphasize planning for non-traditional and emerging security threats.** NATO partners can make significant contributions to alliance missions in areas where they have greater capabilities and/or interests, thus easing disagreements about burden-sharing with U.S. policymakers. Non-traditional issues that European NATO partners are particularly interested in counterterrorism, counterpiracy, cybersecurity and energy security. Emerging security threats that European alliance members can contribute to include Arctic security, Article 5 threats from non-state actors and space. Many of these issues will resonate particularly well with the Eastern members of

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the alliance, as they grow increasingly concerned about Russian assertiveness in these areas. This gives them a non-traditional way to work with the United States, which they value.

- **Reinvigorate efforts to synchronize capabilities between NATO and the European Union, and create institutions to foster coordination.** Pursuing European common security and defense policy on a distinct track from NATO doubles efforts and divides results. Thus far, this has only degraded European foreign and security policy. Efforts to better integrate the two tracks have progressed quite slowly over the years, but should be reinvigorated in the face of declining European defense budgets. NATO and EU leaders should push through current stumbling blocks, including disagreement on questions of where military and civilian lines differ and issues arising from the different memberships of the two institutions.²⁶ Bringing EU military efforts into a NATO exercise program would be one way to explore and strengthen mutual capabilities, while de-emphasizing institutional separation.

Demonstrating NATO's Utility to U.S. Policymakers

While the best way to increase U.S. support for NATO is to improve the military capabilities of the member states, NATO can also do a better job of demonstrating the value of what it already provides to the United States. Several concrete actions

NATO could take to help make the case to the U.S. Congress, executive branch and current and future administrations include:

- **Educate policymakers about successful NATO naval operations, particularly in counterpiracy.** Few American leaders know about the two ongoing NATO maritime operations, or appreciate how much these operations advance U.S. security interests. NATO ships have been patrolling the Mediterranean since shortly after 9/11 as part of Operation Active Endeavor, to deter terrorist activities and to protect shipping lanes through the Straits of Gibraltar.²⁷ And since 2008, NATO has also been conducting a robust and successful counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden and off the Horn of Africa called Operation Ocean Shield.²⁸ NATO naval cooperation is robust and underappreciated, especially in counterpiracy, where some U.S. allies have better capabilities than the United States does (for example with maritime interdiction operations). NATO should work with Congress to sponsor trips for congressional delegations and other U.S. policymakers to see NATO operations in action. Instead of trips to NATO headquarters in Belgium, they should go to places like the Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Center near Souda Bay, Greece, to see counterpiracy training first-hand, or board a European ship participating in Active Endeavor. Such trips would demonstrate the ways in which ongoing NATO operations help advance U.S. security interests.
- **Estimate costs if NATO were to disappear.** NATO will always need substantial U.S. contributions, particularly in areas like intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. But the capabilities it does contribute save the United States money and free up U.S. forces for other missions. Examples include the nearly 27,000 non-U.S. troops under NATO command in Afghanistan,²⁹ the 5,000 troops under NATO command supporting the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo (down from nearly 50,000 in 1999)³⁰ and the maritime efforts described above. By rough order of magnitude, those forces combined are comparable in size to about half of the cuts to the U.S. Army thus far under sequestration.³¹
- **Ensure officials explicitly recognize U.S. military operations executed under NATO auspices as such.** NATO organizations and missions provide a wide variety of important multinational military efforts, almost all of which involve the United States. NATO should be more prominently recognized when U.S. troops are operating within, or U.S. interests are supported by, NATO missions. DOD tends to include the NATO alliance as an afterthought in operations. Highlighting low-profile but important contributions from NATO partners can help make the case for the alliance more salient.
- **Emphasize the value and legitimacy bestowed by NATO as a political body.** NATO provides a forum where 28 democratic countries can debate the merits of possible military operations, and which operates under the principle of unanimity – meaning that any one of those 28 countries can veto a NATO military operation. This stringent requirement bestows a significant degree of legitimacy on multilateral military action. In addition, NATO partners often choose to join NATO military operations– and place their forces within the alliance’s unified command structure – which increases the political legitimacy of those operations. For example, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan has included troops from no fewer than 37, and as many as 50, countries.³² And Jordan, Morocco, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates participated in NATO operations in Libya,³³ which provided additional regional

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legitimacy. Yet as valuable as this political legitimacy is, it means little unless the alliance has the military capabilities to effectively execute the operations it authorizes.

Conclusion

NATO remains the most enduring and successful multilateral alliance in U.S. history, which continues to connect a wide range of states that share common values, interests, legal frameworks and a commitment to common defense. NATO alone continues to provide the multinational interoperability, command structure and deployable capabilities that make it the partner of first resort for the United States. In short, the NATO alliance matters. And with some judicious policy and organizational shifts, NATO can endure and stay relevant in the 21st century.

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NATO and U.S. flags wave in the wind
outside NATO headquarters in Brussels on
October 21, 2011.

(VIRGINIA MAYO/Associated Press)