



NATO Discovers that War is Bad for Women

Doug Bandow

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization once defended Western civilization. The alliance was to hold back the Soviet hordes from conquering “Old Europe,” as it was later called. Then disaster struck. The enemy disappeared: the Soviet Union dissolved and Warsaw Pact broke up.

For the last quarter century the quintessential anti-Moscow alliance has sought to find a new purpose. Recently the transatlantic alliance shifted back to containing Russia. Yet the effort has generated little enthusiasm among members other than those along Russia’s border.

So Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg is pushing another, perhaps more popular, cause: protecting women. Two years ago the organization held a conference on gender equality, at which Stoltenberg declared the issue to be critical.

After all, he explained, “NATO is a values-based organization and none of the Alliance’s fundamental values—individual liberties, democracy, human rights and the rule of law—work without equality.” Actually, that’s not true—Western nations established a generally effective rule of law and protective system for liberties even when forced to accommodate sometimes pervasive injustice, including slavery.

Stoltenberg also claimed that “by integrating gender within our operations, we make a tangible difference to the lives of women and children.” In fact, NATO has found it to be difficult if not impossible to transform another nation’s culture.

The allies have not liberated women across Afghanistan despite more than 16 years of combat. The U.S. doesn’t even interfere with the pervasive sex slavery of young boys, called bacha bazi, or dancing boys, by Afghan military personnel.

None of this stopped actress Angelina Jolie from visiting NATO headquarters in Brussels. She also coauthored an article with Stoltenberg entitled “Why NATO must Defend Women’s Rights.” It cited the impact of armed conflict on women, particularly the role of “sexual violence” which “accounts in large part for why it is often more dangerous to be a woman in a warzone today than it is to be a soldier.”

That may be true, but all civilians are vulnerable to the violence of war. In World War II explosives and incendiaries as well as atomic bombs destroyed entire cities, causing mass death and destruction. Nazi forces devoted tremendous effort to kill millions of Jews and many other victims of all sexes and ages. The essential problem is violence, not gender.

NATO's chief responsibility is to deter wars when possible and win wars when not. No alliance can effectively function if it diverts resources from fighting those conflicts to address some violence against some victims.

Yet Stoltenberg and Jolie want to add to NATO's responsibilities. One duty they proposed is to "integrate gender issues into its strategic thinking as part of its values" and promote "the role of women in the military." Meaning what, exactly? Better for the armed forces to focus on their overall mission and choose the best service personnel, irrespective of gender, who will most effectively perform their important duties while seeking to protect all civilians.

Another objective proposed by the two is to raise the standards of other militaries. But training programs have only a limited impact on personnel coming from hostile cultures. The U.S. has trained foreign soldiers for years but has not transformed foreign militaries.

Jolie and Stoltenberg also want NATO personnel to be "trained to prevent, recognize and respond to sexual and gender-based violence." That might make sense for civil affairs officers in an occupation, but not combat troops. The alliance's most important task is to defeat bad guys in battle.

Finally, Jolie and Stoltenberg advocate "reporting crimes and supporting work to bring perpetrators to justice." There are plenty of appropriate targets for human rights prosecutions. However, few suspects have been brought before the International Criminal Court.

Ironically, Jolie admitted that her greatest concern was one that could not be solved by NATO: the plight of the Rohingya in Burma; "We should all hang our head on how little we have been able to do." Which is no different than so many other tragedies around the world.

Violence against women is a monstrous crime. But NATO's essential duties do not include promoting gender equality. The European Union "does" social engineering. NATO, however, is supposed to be a military alliance formed to defend the continent against existential or at least serious military threats.

Instead of seeking press attention by inviting a famous actress to Brussels, Stoltenberg should work on convincing European peoples that there is a threat and they need to spend more to meet it. Otherwise, what is NATO's purpose today?

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.