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NATO's Lack Of Any Serious Purpose Means It Should Retire

By: Doug Bandow – April 22, 2013

NATO's foreign ministers are meeting this week and have a "busy agenda," proclaims the alliance. Yet NATO no longer has any serious purpose.

European countries want to be military powers, but increasingly are failing to maintain capable forces. America always has been the dominant power in NATO. The U.S. may soon be the only effective power in the alliance. NATO should retire.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created more than six decades ago. Having fought to free Western Europe from Nazi domination, Washington was determined to keep Western Europe free from Soviet domination. Yet a Soviet invasion quickly became unlikely, if for no other reason than the potential of escalation to nuclear war.

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R. the transatlantic alliance became irrelevant. Its purpose, famously explained Lord Hastings Ismay, was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." All of these objectives had been met.

Today the Soviet Union is gone. Russia may be hostile, but it lacks both the will and ability to threaten Europe. At most Moscow can beat up on weak neighbors like Georgia.

Germany remains down militarily, skeptical of international involvement. Ironically, most of Europe wants Berlin to do more. Economically the federal republic is way up—underwriting the entire European Union.

The U.S. is in. America and Europe share history, tradition, and values. Economic ties may grow through a transatlantic free trade agreement. Military links are secondary.

However, despite the changed international environment institutional survival became NATO's paramount objective. Proposals were advanced to shift from deterring the Soviets to combating illegal drug use, underwriting student exchanges, and promoting environmental protection.

Eventually the alliance decided to operate "out of area." As common security threats disappeared, members increasingly used the alliance to drag other members into narrow conflicts favored by only a few members.

Germany helped trigger the Balkan wars with its speedy recognition of the seceding Yugoslavian territories without any protection for Serbian minorities. While the initial

attack on Afghanistan to displace al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban properly responded to 9/11, the years of combat that followed (and which continue) did not. Britain and France pressed for war in Libya even though they were incapable of prosecuting it alone. Mali belongs to Paris, though as yet the rest of the alliance has stayed out of combat there.

These unnecessary wars have kept the alliance busy, but they also have accelerated its decline. They demonstrate that NATO is irrelevant to its members' security. Many Europeans no longer even see any obvious need for national militaries. Observed Christian Moelling with the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik: "At a time of significant financial hardship, some ... might even begin to question the merit of having armed forces at all." Europe faces the prospect of having armed forces consisting of little more than gaudily garbed ceremonial soldiers, strutting in front of palaces and parliaments.

Oddly, at this moment the old imperial temptation appears to be reasserting itself in some European capitals. Philip Stephens wrote in the Financial Times that "Europeans have caught the interventionist bug just as the U.S. has shaken it off. The French and the British led the war to depose Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. They are in the vanguard of calls for intervention in Syria." Paris also acted in Mali. The Europeans seem increasingly determined to reshape conflicts and rebuild nations throughout the Middle East and Africa without possessing the military force to do so.

With this backdrop a senior NATO official visited Washington last week. He spoke at a private gathering, quipping that he couldn't be quoted but he could be fired. The discussion suggested an alliance in terminal decline.

He argued that NATO is being transformed by several important events. One is Afghanistan, which has dominated NATO thinking for more than a decade yet has "reduced the aptitude for crisis management," that is, fighting wars "beyond direct defense." Another is the diminution of terrorism as a strategic concern. It still exists, witness Boston. But rather than posing "an overarching threat," it is something that "we will have to live with."

The financial-economic crisis continues, sapping military budgets on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result "there is no chance for budget increases, not even for keeping spending levels as they are." The energy revolution is reducing the "political relevance of the Persian Gulf and Russia." The so-called pivot to Asia will further diminish American force levels in Europe.

All of these have had an effect. But the elephant in the room is the disappearance of any transatlantic security need. Military alliances are intended to deal with common threats. One existed during the Cold War. But no longer.

So what should NATO do as the troops come home from Afghanistan? One of the event's participants urged Syria as the next mission for the alliance. If not, then what is the use of NATO, he asked? However, the conflict poses no direct threat to any alliance member—a few artillery shells landing on Turkish territory don't count. Getting involved in a brutal civil war in which one side possesses a sizable army armed with chemical weapons and the other side includes many anti-Western radicals would be madness.

Another discussant suggested getting back to the core duty of collective security, including cyber security and missile defense. However, such activities, though useful, do

not require a formal military alliance among the western powers. Cyber cooperation should extend well beyond Europe, while anti-missile activity could mix bilateral and regional links.

Would not expanding the alliance reinforce the more traditional security mission? One questioner contended that NATO membership would secure the borders of Montenegro from Serbia, from which Montenegro seceded. Another participant proposed adding Georgia, which desires protection from Russia.

However, the transatlantic alliance is not a charity. NATO's purpose is to guard the security of existing members, not to risk their security protecting other countries. Serbia poses no danger to the U.S. and its allies, which dismembered what was left of Yugoslavia not that many years ago. There's no reason for America to threaten war on behalf of Montenegro, one of the resulting pieces.

Adding Tbilisi to NATO would be even more foolish. Georgia was part of the Russian Empire before the Soviet Union. Georgia is entitled to independence, but not to U.S. protection. Washington has nothing at stake which warrants confronting nuclear-armed Moscow over interests the latter views as vital in its own backyard. Doing so would degrade, not enhance, American security.

The most plausible continuing NATO role is to train the militaries of friendly nations to empower them to handle military contingencies in their own neighborhoods. But that doesn't require a formal military alliance constantly looking for new wars to fight.

The biggest challenge facing the alliance is shrinking national force structures. The NATO visitor acknowledged that "all Europeans are cutting their militaries, including the big spenders." Defense Secretaries Robert Gates and Leon Panetta both lamented Europe's waning efforts. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently admitted: "if European defense spending cuts continue, Europe's ability to be a stabilizing force even in its neighborhood will rapidly disappear."

There's no reason to believe the reductions won't continue. Last year the Brookings Institution published a report reviewing widespread cutbacks across the continent. Explained Clara Marina O'Donnell: "current military spending trends are reducing the ability of most NATO allies to contribute to international security."

Troop numbers are coming down sharply. Moreover, recently reported Stars and Stripes, "Cuts by countries as large as Germany and as small as Latvia have resulted in program cancellations, changed equipment orders and, in the case of Britain, a plan to mothball a new aircraft carrier."

Earlier this year Rasmussen declared that "There is a lower limit on how little we can spend on defense." Where is it? In 2006 the NATO members promised to spend two percent of GDP on the military. Today the Europeans collectively spend 1.5 percent of GDP on defense, compared to America's five percent. Americans spend \$2333 per person on the military, compared to just \$503 by Europeans. Despite the much-maligned budget sequester, Washington continues to account for roughly 40 percent of the entire globe's military outlays.

The visiting official recognized the problem. If we take Secretary Gates' formulation "that NATO is dead if members don't spend two percent of GDP, then NATO is dead as they will not spend two percent of GDP." Thus, he complained that "focusing burden-sharing on finances doesn't get us anywhere." Instead, he suggested giving "burden-sharing a different spin."

He argued that despite Europe's diminishing commitment to the alliance, America still benefited. "The European allies may be useless for many things, but they still provide legitimacy and the continent acts as a worldwide operational hub."

However, that legitimacy is of little account if Washington believes a vital issue to be at stake. The American people don't care; they will support their government even in the face of widespread international opposition, evident in Vietnam and Iraq, for instance. What turned the U.S. public against these wars were the reality of casualties and the perception of failure. Where legitimacy seems to be important, either the United Nations or a coalition of the willing would prove sufficient.

Nor is a formal alliance necessary for base access and logistical backing. Washington could forge replacement arrangements with individual European states as well as any continental European military alliance. Given the deep differences of opinion which emerged over such issues as Iraq, Libya, and Syria, less formal cooperative mechanisms would reduce political tensions. A country could offer operational support without providing combat units or even endorsing a particular conflict. Funding for a nation's military would not be undercut by participation in an unpopular international conflict.

Despite its problems at home, NATO bizarrely is seeking to expand abroad. Rasmussen recently traveled to Japan and South Korea to promote NATO cooperation in Asia.

How can a European alliance increasingly incapable of defending Europe play a role in Asia? There are opportunities for non-military cooperation: sharing expertise on civil emergencies, advancing cyber-security, and promoting non-proliferation. However, these relationships could as easily involve the European Union as NATO. Noted Richard Weitz of the Hudson Institute, "while NATO has adopted a global perspective, its main activities beyond Europe and Afghanistan thus far have consisted primarily of dialogue."

Alliances should be based on international circumstance. Rasmussen recently argued that "The need for a strong military alliance between Europe and North America has never been stronger." That is nonsense. Neither continent faces an existential military threat. Neither faces a significant global competitor. Neither has a compelling interest to meddle in regional conflicts. While there is much about which the U.S. and Europe should cooperate, there is no need for an American-dominated transatlantic military alliance.

Thus, what is needed is U.S. burden-shedding rather than allied burden-sharing. Europeans could provide forces sufficient to defend themselves, patrol the Mediterranean, aid the Central Asia states, and protect their interests in North Africa and the Middle East. If they chose not to do so, no worries for America. But they shouldn't expect Washington to step in. And U.S. officials then could stop their unproductive whining about Europe's defense choices.

America's Cold War security policy shielded war-torn allies until they could recover and gain the economic means and political stability to defend themselves. That policy was a great success. Now Washington should celebrate by turning NATO over the Europeans.