

After Chicago, How Long Can NATO Stay Relevant?

By [Ishaan Tharoor](#) | [@ishaantharoor](#) | May 23, 2012

An essay I wrote in the international magazine last week sets out [NATO's existential quandary](#). The organization wrapped up its biggest summit ever in [Chicago](#) on Monday, but it was drowned out in part by the din both of protesters massed on the Windy City's streets and the incessant hubbub of the U.S. presidential election cycle.

For all of [NATO's](#) telegraphed messaging about [Afghanistan](#), its commitment to global security partnerships and its earnest talk of reinvigorating European defense policy, there is an overwhelming sense that this grand old alliance is indeed, as its own agenda proclaims, at a “crossroads.”

(PHOTOS: [Protesters clash with police outside the NATO summit in Chicago.](#))

Here's part of my magazine piece, which starts at the construction site of NATO's new offices in Brussels:

Billboards and signs on the outside tout what will emerge by 2015: an over \$1 billion space-ship structure of glass and steel, open offices and soaring footbridges. An airy, light-filled “agora” — that ancient meeting place of the public — will thread through the curved wings of the complex, replete with “areas for collaboration” and espresso bars. It is a building, NATO trumpets, fit for the needs of the 21st century.

But does the 21st century still need NATO? Back on the other side of the street, NATO's current home embodies the arguments of its critics. It is a fusty anachronism, a grim set of converted barracks built on a disused airfield once developed by Hitler's Luftwaffe. In 1967, when NATO—then the West's military bulwark against the Soviet threat—shifted offices here from Paris, the site was meant to be only temporary. But it has remained in its current state for four and a half decades, a drab relic of another era, outlasting the Cold War and the disintegration of the U.S.S.R.

Inside NATO, the officials busying about in military green and bespoke blue speak only of the future.... “NATO is as relevant as ever, “ says its cobalt-eyed Secretary General

Anders Fogh Rasmussen. “NATO is the strongest, most successful military alliance in the world. And now, faced with new security challenges, we have adapted.”

When we met, Rasmussen hailed the success of the alliance’s intervention in Libya last year, where European leadership and American know-how combined to halt Muammar Gaddafi’s bloody rampage. In Afghanistan—top of the Chicago agenda—NATO has led the fight against the Taliban. NATO is keeping the peace in Kosovo, helps patrol the waters off Somalia’s coast and monitors the airspace above the Baltic Sea. Long past the Cold War, says Rasmussen, the alliance is now at “the hub of all global security.”

But for all that spin, it’s hard to dispel the sense that NATO is reaching a moment of existential confusion, if not crisis. For years, the U.S.’s ties with Western Europe have seemed paramount. NATO is the central cog of the much-vaunted trans-Atlantic relationship: “With the day-to-day interaction of its members, on a political and military level,” says Charles Kupchan, professor of international affairs at Georgetown University and a fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, “NATO creates a kind of social fabric of the West.” But as the financial crisis shrinks budgets in Europe, and as the U.S. turns its strategic focus away from the Mediterranean and the Middle East toward the Pacific and Asia, that fabric of the West is fraying at the edges.

The U.S. itself, like other austerity-hit Western countries, is reckoning with the waning of its own unipolar, “hyperpower” status, a sense of decline that has compelled many observers to call for Europe to stand up on its own feet. That won’t be easy. “There’s a general kind of aversion to security issues among the Europeans,” says Jan Techau, director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s European program in Brussels. “For decades, they have outsourced the need to think strategically about themselves and the world.” Take the operation in Libya: though the U.K. and France led the charge—and their leaders took much of the credit—nothing would have been accomplished without the U.S. doing all the heavy lifting behind the scenes, from running surveillance ops and the bulk of the sorties to providing specific types of munitions for NATO aircraft. The Europeans, remember, ran out of bombs. Read one way, NATO is less a testament to the West’s collective might than it is an indicator of its increasing fragility.

At Chicago, one of the central issues on the agenda was that of “smart defense”—the term NATO peddles when urging European governments to start pooling and sharing their military resources more effectively. At a briefing in Brussels ahead of the summit, NATO officials touted smart defense with a somewhat cute PowerPoint presentation: little cartoon men walked around clutching oversized, multi-colored pieces of a jigsaw puzzle they had to put together. But to get European countries to actually arrive at a place where they’re willing to shed their own sovereign interests and solve this puzzle is easier than done. Techau insists it is a matter of necessity: “The nation-states of Europe will have to finally come to the conclusion that they’ll only save their position in the world if they really start to pool their forces and start to act as one.” Given the current dysfunction gripping Brussels-based European governance — and the sense of malaise hanging over the whole European project — that prospect still seems distant.

Beyond struggling with Europe's own political and economic realities, NATO has to confront a broader philosophical question: what is it for? Europe's territorial integrity — in whose defense NATO was first established — faces few real threats. As spiky and difficult as Vladimir Putin's Russia is, it is no Soviet Union. Nor do populations living in NATO have much of an interest in sustained adventures abroad: The irony of the protracted endgame in Afghanistan is that it gave NATO's leadership something of a focus for the past decade, a cause around which to rally and justify itself. But once the mission draws down by 2014, it's hard to imagine the alliance embarking on an operation of that scale ever again. As it is, NATO's inability to have an impact on events in conflict-ridden Syria—officials in Brussels insist they have not even done contingency planning for some kind of intervention—suggests the Libya campaign was the exception which proves no rule.

(READ: [NATO and the Decline of the West.](#))

Defenders of NATO, such as Techau, speak of it as a “huge machine for creating stability.” Ivo Daalder, the affable U.S. ambassador to NATO, says the alliance is “a force multiplier that allows us to do more and do it better.” Rasmussen maintains that his organization is still something of an ideological bloc, “a community of values” built around a commitment to “individual liberty, democracy, and the rule of law.”

But none of this necessarily means the alliance as an institution will grow more relevant. Other rising democracies, such as India and Brazil, have little interest in getting enmeshed in what is an organization built long ago to buttress U.S. foreign policy. While Washington and many of its Pacific allies — Japan and Australia, in particular — share concerns about the rise of authoritarian China, no one has any interest or incentive in confronting Beijing as a latter day Cold War enemy. Even if geopolitical faultlines were to harden, it's unclear what role NATO would play: “What European country would ever go to war with China to protect Taiwan,” asks Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to U.S. President Ronald Reagan. “The Europeans would run screaming from the room.”

And maybe that's for the best. Bandow, a noted [NATO skeptic](#), insists that “Europe remains and is going to remain the closest cultural and historical ally of the U.S., but NATO forces everyone to think of the relationship in military terms.” That may be anachronistic. Rather than military posturing, other concerns now dominate international politics. “The geopolitical balance is becoming increasingly driven by questions of economy, not security,” says Ian Bremmer, author of *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*. These are 21st century questions for which NATO, a 20th century alliance, does not have any answers.