NATO and the Resilience of the Great Transatlantic Bargain

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While soldiers from the alliance’s armies are still fighting it out at the Hindu Kush, leaders of NATO are busy charting the post-Afghanistan future of the world’s most successful military pact. On November 19-20, a NATO summit in Lisbon will adopt a New Strategic Concept for the alliance and deal with a number of other crucial issues such as relations with Russia, Missile Defense, the organization’s internal reform, revamped partnership programs, nuclear strategy, and the application of the comprehensive approach.

Whether rushing through such a densely packed agenda will be able to quell the ever-present debate about NATO’s “unavoidable” and “unstoppable” demise remains to be seen. In the past, skeptics were busy pointing at a number of inner-alliance difficulties, some of them structural, to predict the impending break-up of NATO. Among these difficulties were, typically, a lack of defense investments, a widening capabilities gap between the US and European allies, and diverging threat perceptions amongst NATO member states. While these problems have indeed been of substantial concern for NATO leaders and analysts, they have not proven deadly for NATO. For twenty years (and even longer), NATO has been able to manage these issues while remaining relevant for its old members and attractive for potential new ones. These problems could not undermine NATO because they were, ultimately, not substantial enough to destroy the grand strategic trade-off that is the fundament of the alliance. A closer look at this trade-off reveals the reasons for its sturdiness.

NATO was created as the enabling and managing agency for the great post-war transatlantic bargain. In this deal, the United States provided Europe with a security guarantee against the Soviet threat (in form of hundreds of thousands of troops on European soil and, more importantly, by means of the nuclear umbrella) in return for relatively moderate contributions by European States during the Cold War. The Americans also received, through NATO, a veto power in inner-European affairs. In return, they provided the capital for jumpstarting the ruined European economies. This deal knew only winners: the Americans won allies in the systemic conflict with Communist expansionism and established itself firmly in Europe, its geo-strategic counter-coast. The Europeans were protected from Warsaw Pact blackmail and invasion, while at the same time being able to invest large sums (that would have otherwise been spent on defense) into their welfare states and social systems, thereby pacifying their war-torn societies.

Surprisingly, with the political and strategic landscapes having changed so fundamentally since the 1950s, this transatlantic deal is still providing the basis for the European security architecture in the year 2010. Despite the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact having disappeared, European integration having created wealth and stability, and war in Europe looking all but impossible, the bargain is still intact. No-one wants to walk out. Why?

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First of all, the Europeans are, by and large, unable to provide the means to guarantee their own security in case of an (unlikely yet not unthinkable) existential threat. Consequently, even those Europeans most skeptical about US leadership, and those most friendly with the “new” Russia, are not seeking any alternative to the existing security setup in Europe. (Let alone those Europeans whose fear of Russia makes them see NATO as their life insurance). Furthermore, despite some occasional acrimony, Europeans are actually rather contented with America's benign hegemony.

On the other side of the deal, the United States, although having re-channeled military and intellectual resources away from Europe to other world regions, most notably Asia, appreciates the general reliability of its European partners, understands that cultural similarities make Europeans easier and better allies than could be found anywhere else in the world, and still values its European military installations as being strategically located for African and Middle Eastern contingencies. Also, whether justified or not, American skepticism of Russia has never entirely faded away, serving as a constant reminder in Washington for the need of a continued presence in Europe.

In addition, NATO’s historically unprecedented function as a creator of trust who makes every ally’s troop movements, procurements projects and force structures utterly transparent to everybody else in the alliance, remains as valuable as ever. Finally, the West's relative decline will make defense and security cooperation across the Atlantic even more important, making NATO, once more, the security agency organization of choice.

Safe to say then that NATO does not run the risk of being dismantled or rendered useless anytime soon. Neither the fact that European armies will most likely be even less capable after the latest rounds of budget cuts and reforms, nor the ostentatious lack of interest for Europe by consecutive American governments will, for now, be powerful enough to undermine the fundamental strategic considerations that keep Europeans and Americans committed to the old transatlantic bargain – and to NATO as its principle arbiter.