



The Fight Against Terrorism: Where's NATO?

Tomas Valasek

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the current counterterrorist operations is that the world's strongest military alliance, NATO, is nowhere in sight. The formerly 16, now 19, allies spent decades planning for jointly defending one another from an attack. Yet when the military operations in Afghanistan began, the White House essentially asked NATO to stay out of the conflict, despite its offers of help and the gallant gesture of evoking the mutual defense clause in its founding document, the 1949 Washington Treaty, for the first time ever.

Only after more than a month of fighting did the White House accept the allies' offers of thousands of combat and support troops, and then only in limited numbers and outside NATO's chain of command. In one of the more bizarre episodes in the conflict so far, British special forces units arriving in Afghanistan in late November were confined to their base by America's allies in the country, the Northern Alliance. London also halted at the last moment the movement of thousands more U.K. troops to Afghanistan. However, both Washington and London played down suggestions that they disagreed on the role of British troops in the conflict, blaming the botched operation on communication failures.

The alliance's formal participation is limited to the deployment of a handful of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft in the United States, and modest naval assets in the Middle East. The United States also requested and received access to allied bases and seaports. At the same time, Washington made clear that

the counterterrorist campaign will be led by the United States, not NATO. "If we need collective action, we'll ask for it," said U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz.¹ Campaign decisions are made in the Pentagon, not in Brussels.

Where does the U.S. administration's new emphasis on counterterrorism leave NATO? Some alliance observers say NATO's role as a fighting body is over, or will at best be limited to peacekeeping. Russian president Vladimir Putin would like NATO to become a political forum. U.S. officials have yet to specify the alliance's relevance to their antiterrorism campaign, and the form and extent of future military participation by NATO allies. Given the growing gap between U.S. military needs and NATO capabilities—both those capabilities of the individual European members and the collective skills of the allies as a group—the alliance may find itself relegated to the role of bit player in future U.S. defense planning.

Excluding NATO from America's fledgling war on terrorism does hold some advantages from the U.S. perspective. No longer does Washington need to seek the approval of all 19 allies for each and every step of the military campaign, as was the case in Kosovo. U.S. commanders need not worry whom to trust with key intelligence or who might leak it to the enemy.

On the other hand, the go-it-alone approach carries a price tag. There are concrete military reasons for NATO involvement in U.S. defense planning. NATO's founding idea—sharing the military burden in order to make each ally stronger than it could be

individually—still holds. European allies and Canada, albeit far less powerful militarily than the United States, offer assets and capabilities that could complement and strengthen those of the United States in its counterterrorist campaign. The alliance's fleet of AWACS aircraft that are helping the overburdened North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) patrol the skies over America is just one example. British special forces are also operating in and around Afghanistan, capitalizing on their unique skills and contacts in the area. And even though NATO is not formally involved, the joint operations of European troops with U.S. forces were made possible by hundreds of standardization agreements hammered out under NATO's auspices. NATO troops speak a common language and understand each other's command procedures because of decades of joint training under the alliance's flag.

For future counterterrorist activities, NATO's history of joint force structure planning and training makes it a logical forum for developing new tools against terrorism, rather than individual countries doing so at a much higher price. But the alliance's continued prominent role in U.S. defense planning is by no means guaranteed, unless current and future allies pay more attention to their military capabilities, particularly the kind of expertise needed to fight the war against terrorism. Since September 11, the focus of U.S. diplomats and military commanders has shifted nearly exclusively to antiterrorist activities. If the allies fail to respond to the change, they risk losing their security link to the United States. It is not a matter of simply staying in America's good graces. Terrorism has emerged as the defining threat and, for obvious reasons Americans are adjusting faster than their allies. If NATO is to continue performing its useful role, all allies must cross the bridge together.

Three things will define Washington's approach to NATO in the coming months

and years: capabilities, capabilities, capabilities. It is hardly a new theme—American delegates chastising their European counterparts for spending too little on defense (or spending on the wrong things) have been a regular feature of NATO meetings for years. Virtually every piece of legislation in the U.S. Congress involving NATO, such as bills on enlargement or missile defense, pass with at least an attempt by lawmakers to attach amendments mandating greater European contributions. But so long as there was no discernible threat on the horizon, the imperative to “get things done” prevailed over those who advocated holding out for more robust European participation.

Countering Terrorism

The September 11 attacks and subsequent U.S. military action have triggered a reorganization of U.S. defense priorities, including a reevaluation of America's military ties with NATO and other allies. Where exactly the United States will place the emphasis in its relations with its NATO partners is not yet entirely clear. Countering terrorism is a relatively new mission for U.S. forces, and the Bush administration is still struggling to find the right mixture of armed operations and diplomatic measures. Nevertheless, the course of the war so far allows for a sketch of the military capabilities and skills likely to be part of any long-term approach. Besides searching within its own arsenal, the United States is also beginning to look to its allies for help. As one seasoned NATO observer noted: “The one and only question U.S. senators are going to want to know is: What is country X doing to contribute to the counterterrorism effort?”

The campaign in Afghanistan (ongoing at this writing) illustrates ways in which the NATO allies can participate. Some are discussed below, in what is meant as a rough guide, rather than a detailed plan. This list is by no means exhaustive and focuses mostly on operations and assets in the current theater of conflict. Clearly, a variety of other

capabilities will be required as the U.S. campaign expands.

Nor is the list meant to imply that the United States faces shortfalls across all these areas—in fact, many are more than adequately covered. With few exceptions, the collective military capability of the other NATO members in any given area is inferior to that of the United States. The United States spends more than twice as much on its military as all other NATO allies combined (\$343.2 billion in Fiscal Year 2002, vs. roughly \$150 billion for the allies).² The U.S. budget is also divided among a handful of producers overseen by one Defense Department, whereas much of the spending by the rest of the NATO allies is lost to redundancies inherent in arming and operating 18 separate military forces.

But that does not mean that NATO allies cannot contribute to missions for which the United States is already equipped. Besides the obvious symbolic importance of Europeans fighting terrorism alongside the Americans, NATO contributions can lessen the operational stress on U.S. troops and equipment. The longer the campaign continues, the more the United States will need replacements for units deployed in and around Afghanistan. In some instances, European forces will indeed possess skills unavailable to their American counterparts, whether it is knowledge of countries and terrain in which the United States has not previously operated, or in indigenous military technology. For example, several countries have better chemical and biological detection squads: the Czech Republic, Germany, and Italy have agreed to send their specialized detection units to Afghanistan.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs): These pilotless drones are generally used to survey enemy forces and a region's topography. In Afghanistan, UAVs also debuted in a combat role, reportedly firing antitank missiles in the failed attempt to save the life of Abdul Haq, an Afghan opposition leader who was captured and executed by the Taliban. UAVs

are playing a crucial role in Afghanistan in helping to locate terrorist bases and personnel. The United States operates several types of UAVs—the Navy's Pioneer, the Army's Hunter, and the Air Force's Predator have all been used in recent conflicts. The Air Force also owns four new medium-altitude Global Hawks, and plans to buy a total of 51 of them.³ UAVs' high attrition rate—most models fly low and at slow speeds, making them vulnerable to ground fire—means that allied forces are in constant need of additional platforms. Of the 60 Predators originally in the Air Force's inventory, 20 were lost to mishaps or enemy fire. Only about 40 Hunters remain in the Army's arsenal; their production was discontinued years ago.⁴ A number of European allies operate UAV fleets and have successfully operated them in Bosnia, Kosovo, and elsewhere. At least 70 UAV programs are estimated to be under development in Europe.⁵

Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs): This category covers a broad range of ammunition, from laser-guided bombs to "dumb" bombs made "smart" by the addition of steering surfaces and Global Positioning System (GPS) kits. Precision ammunition is in increasing demand because it allows, at least in theory, for the destruction of enemy targets at a minimal cost in civilian lives and for minimal damage to the surrounding area. During the 1991 Gulf war, roughly 9 percent of all munitions dropped were precision-guided. This increased to 70 percent during Operation Allied Force in Kosovo.⁶ The conflict in Afghanistan has seen extensive use of PGMs, including a special subcategory, penetration bombs. Designed to travel through several feet of earth or concrete before exploding, these bombs are being used in Afghanistan to attack caves and other hardened targets. The United States has by far the largest arsenal of PGMs, but it too periodically runs short on certain types of smart bombs, such as air-launched cruise missiles, particularly because of their heavy use during the 1999 air war against

Yugoslavia. Among the European allies, Britain has submarines armed with precision-guided cruise missiles, which have already been employed in Afghanistan. France and Britain are also developing a new “stealth” cruise missile, the Storm Shadow, specially designed for penetration of hardened targets.

Special Forces: Capabilities are not just a function of equipment but also of human skills. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of special forces units. Special forces have been an integral part of warfare for hundreds of years, but the Afghanistan campaign has relied on special operations more so than other recent campaigns. U.S. and U.K. commando units have served as forward observers, guiding bombing runs or equipping and training the opposition Northern Alliance forces. At this writing, special forces are reportedly involved in the assault on the Tora Bora cave complex in the hunt for Osama bin Laden and other leaders of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization. The bulk of the special forces troops in Afghanistan are American, either Navy SEALs or Army Rangers, but British Special Air Service (SAS) troops have been operating alongside U.S. special forces. Turkey offered 90 special forces troops in November. France and Germany also offered units, which may already be operating in Afghanistan.

These are just a few of the skills and assets the NATO allies can provide to bolster U.S.-led counterterrorist efforts. NATO’s burden-sharing debates have historically focused on budgets, with actual or potential members pledging to maintain military spending at a certain agreed percentage of gross domestic product. In the years after the end of the Cold War, when NATO lacked a clearly defined mission and thus a clearly articulated set of required skills, budgets were a useful tool for assessing the level of members’ contributions to the alliance. But budgets are simply a means to an end, which in this case is a set of skills needed to fight terrorism. What is needed now is a

shift in emphasis from budgets to acquiring concrete skills, in proportion to a country’s economic strength.

Improving NATO’s Skills

While possessing the right skills and equipment is crucial, the NATO alliance has always been far more than the sum of its parts. Its greatest strength is its ability to turn portions of individual members’ armed forces into an integrated fighting force, thus reducing the budgetary and operational stress on individual allies. Joint force structure planning allows the allies to divide up, to a certain extent, the burden of building military forces to meet the alliance’s goals, and to focus on individual areas of expertise. The ability to put the disparate pieces together comes through complex standardization agreements and regular training exercises.

The alliance, through a number of committees and other mechanisms, coordinates its members’ defense plans and the establishment of target goals for their militaries’ size and composition. The mechanisms were created during the Cold War in order to make sure that the alliance as a whole maintained a force capable of deterring a Soviet attack. But it also allows all allies to reduce their military expenditures by sharing the defense burden with one another. The benefits of this approach are more obvious in the case of the smaller states. They stand to gain the most by augmenting their military strength, through NATO’s collective action, in case of an attack.

The United States more so than any of its allies has historically had a “go it alone” approach to defense planning. The U.S. role in the alliance has been one of a guarantor rather than a benefactor, even though all allies clearly profited from deterring a devastating war with the Soviet Union. Then again, the common wisdom in NATO was that it was created to guarantee America’s help in case of an attack on Europe. Few foresaw that the alliance would ever be used

in defense of America after terrorists attacked two of its cities. The new dynamic in NATO relations needs to be reflected in force planning as well. It could begin with NATO's Defense Planning Group and other bodies involved in coordinating military plans, making terrorism a high priority and looking for ways of augmenting the alliance's collective skills in this area.

Similarly, NATO's elaborate system of joint exercises is due for a revision. Although they serve a number of political purposes such as demonstrating support for particular candidate countries, the main goal of NATO exercises remains training for joint allied operations. The number of exercises and the types of scenarios employed give a good indication of the kinds of conflicts that NATO is preparing to fight, and attest to the depth of allied expertise in the various types of operations.

Military establishments, it has been said, always prepare to fight the last war instead of the next. This proved true in NATO's case: in 2001, full-spectrum exercises involving joint combat training were exceeded by humanitarian and peacekeeping exercises. Allies were far more likely to be training for supporting election observers than for a shooting war. Admittedly, this picture is slightly deceiving—many valuable skills gained in, for example, a humanitarian relief exercise can and will be used in combat operations. In particular, expertise in support missions translates better across different types of operations than specific combat skills—the communications tasks in a peacekeeping operation will not differ much from those in a combat operation, certainly not as much as the shooter's task would. Modern warfare is a complex endeavor involving public relations staffs, local liaisons, and a plethora of other behind-the-scenes activities. Support troops routinely outnumber actual combat units.

Nevertheless, at the "pointed end of the spear"—the frontline troops level—specialized skills and training are paramount. If

NATO is to make a concerted effort to build skills for the fight against terrorism, its exercise programs must take into account the new military challenges. NATO allies stand to benefit directly as well. For example, expertise built in NATO's May 2001 naval exercise focusing on coastal defense and port control is finding an unexpected new application in providing for homeland defense against terrorism in Europe and Canada.

New Members

The catalog of NATO's military capabilities must include likely future members. Quite possibly, a full third of countries that will be members of NATO by the end of next year are still outside the alliance today. NATO is considering admitting as many as seven members at the 2002 Prague summit, which would expand the alliance's membership from 19 to 26. The applicant states, virtually all of them former Warsaw Pact members, have come under scrutiny for their relative military weakness, especially after the three most recent entrants, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, failed to offer a significant military contribution to NATO's 1999 air war against Yugoslavia. Even some leading proponents of the first round of NATO enlargement now advocate a slow, graduated approach that would only introduce new members into the alliance as the applicants' military capabilities mature.

But in this weakness lies an opportunity. The candidate countries are already in the process of tearing down their existing military structures and rebuilding them to conform to NATO's needs and expectations. The process is guided by membership action plans (MAPs), agreements between individual applicant countries and NATO on the shape and extent of military as well as societal reforms needed for membership. MAPs work as shopping lists: NATO uses them to communicate its views on which areas of defense and security need to be strengthened, and applicant states choose as many reform

projects from the list as they desire—or as few, but at the risk of jeopardizing their NATO membership bid.

The U.S. Department of Defense is reported to be reviewing the candidates' capabilities with an eye to their potential contribution to antiterrorist efforts. The logical approach to bolstering these skills among future NATO members would be to identify specific measures needed in the fight against terrorism and include them in the membership action plans. The list goes beyond strictly military measures—the challenge for the new allies is often not how to contribute but rather how to avoid being a liability. In the terrorism context, this means cleaning up the intelligence apparatuses to prevent leaks of classified NATO information to countries supporting terrorism, strengthening visa and border controls, and taking steps to prevent terrorists from using Central and East European banks for financial operations. Much of the work is already under way on the applicant countries' initiative.

NATO's Future Role

NATO's Brussels bureaucracy is slowly coming to terms with an agenda reordered by terrorism. The agenda for NATO's post-September 11 reforms, which NATO secretary general Lord Robertson unveiled to U.S. audiences at the National Press Club in Washington in October, emphasized mainly NATO's diplomatic role. The alliance's efforts in forging a unified political front are very important, but limiting NATO to a cheerleader role would be a waste of the alliance's potential. Lord Robertson appropriately stressed the need for the allies to relieve America of its nonterrorism responsibilities, which is probably the most useful contribution that NATO allies can make in the short term. This process was underway even before the September 11 attacks. In Bosnia in 1995, the United States contributed a full third of all peacekeeping forces. Four years later, in Kosovo the percentage of U.S. troops dropped to 15 percent. Last year

in Macedonia, the United States contributed practically nothing besides redesignating troops already deployed in the country in support of the Kosovo mission. Following the launching of strikes against Afghanistan, U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld informed the allies that the Pentagon would likely withdraw even more troops and equipment from the Balkans in order to bolster its forces in Central Asia.

Admittedly, the shift of NATO's focus to the fight against terrorism would create as many questions as it answers. Is there sufficient political will among NATO allies? The European members once already rejected a U.S. effort to make terrorism a higher priority. At the 1999 Washington summit, the allies beat back a U.S. effort to include terrorism in a broader definition of mutual defense. But that was before the September 11 attacks. By evoking NATO's mutual defense clause a day after the attacks on New York and Washington, European allies made a 180-degree turn on the role of NATO in the fight against terrorism.

What role is left for NATO's command structures? The Afghanistan war is being fought outside NATO's auspices, which allows the United States to be much more selective in involving allies in its decision making. The Europeans have so far gone along because of the strong moral imperative to support the United States in its fight and because of the recognition of America's unique role in this campaign as a victim of the terrorist attacks. But the approach may be unsustainable as a model for all future operations. Allied nations will demand a greater formal role in decision making if they are to risk the lives of their soldiers. The United States, for its part, will resist this effort because it found decision making by committee dangerously cumbersome in past NATO operations. The result will most likely be a two-tiered approach, with NATO's collective command structures overseeing peacekeeping and other missions unrelated

to terrorism and the United States directing antiterrorist efforts unilaterally. ●

Notes

1. "White House Keeps NATO in the Dark," *The Electronic Telegraph* (U.K.), September 28, 2001, www.portal.telegraph.uk

2. Christopher Hellman, *Last of the Big Time Spenders: U.S. Military Budget Still the World's Largest, and Growing* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information, July 16, 2001), www.cdi.org.

3. *Background Briefing on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, October 31, 2001), www.defenselink.mil.

4. Ibid.

5. "Market Survey: Unmanned Air Vehicles in Europe," *Flug Revue*, Issue 2/1997, flug-revue.rotor.com.

6. Stephen H. Baker and Christopher Hellman, "Terrorism and Military Priorities" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information, October 26, 2001), available at www.cdi.org.