

# NATO's Deterrence Review

## Strategic Fiddling while Rome Burns?<sup>1</sup>

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In May 2011, American and European experts on NATO deterrence issues met in Tallinn, Estonia, to consider and help inform the review of NATO's deterrence strategy as mandated by NATO leaders in the November 2010 "Lisbon Summit Declaration."<sup>2</sup> As a keynote speaker at this conference, I discussed the broader political context that will influence the production and implementation of any revised NATO deterrence strategy—specifically, whether or not recent developments in the United States and Europe raised fundamental questions about how well today's alliance serves US and European interests. The big question, I suggested, is whether or not a review of NATO deterrence strategy amounts to strategic fiddling while Rome burns.

This provocative question must be considered by anyone who has been a strong supporter of the transatlantic alliance for many decades. Throughout NATO's history its strategists have faced a dilemma: they can devise intricate deterrence formulas that are intellectually rigorous and logically constructed, but perhaps politically irrelevant—or that at least take insufficient account of the seemingly irrational world of political realities.

Today, the future of the transatlantic security relationship rests less on complex deterrence formulas and decisions, for example, about whether or not to continue deploy US nuclear weapons in Europe, and more on the perceptions of mutual trust and shared interests held on both sides of the Atlantic. NATO must address these perceptions if any strategic concept is to move forward.

### Strategic Fiddling

Thirty years ago, the principal political dilemma facing NATO was the deployment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) missiles. According to the strategic wisdom of the time, the goal was to hold Soviet targets at risk with nuclear delivery systems deployed on European soil, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the strategic link with Europe through the US nuclear guarantee. In the words of Lynn Davis, an architect of the "dual-track" decision in 1979 to deploy US intermediate range missiles in Europe while trying to negotiate limits on those systems: "NATO governments argued that the capability to strike the Soviet Union with systems based on land in Western Europe was necessary in order to convey to the Soviet Union a real sense of risk from any aggression on the continent, and that only a new generation of INF missiles could provide such an assured capability."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the text of a keynote presentation made to the conference on "Adapting NATO's Deterrence Posture" in Tallinn, Estonia on May 5, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> North Atlantic Council, Lisbon Summit Declaration, 20 November 2010, par. 30, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease)

<sup>3</sup> Lynn Davis, "Lessons of the INF Treaty," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1988 (Accessed at [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com)).

The public debate, however, tended to be dominated by less esoteric arguments. Americans who favored the deployments saw them as necessary simply to “balance” the Soviet deployments of SS-20 missiles. European opponents, many of whom took to the streets to protest in large numbers, believed the deployments would increase the danger of nuclear war on European soil, rather than deter it. On the other hand, some American opponents asked why the United States should be taking on such a major new commitment when the Europeans seemed unappreciative and free-riding. In such discussions, the true strategic rationale of the dual track decision got lost, especially when the 1987 INF Treaty eliminated all intermediate-range US and Soviet nuclear-armed ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles. This accord, negotiated by US President Ronald Reagan’s administration, was hailed as a major breakthrough in East-West arms control. The accord surprised many who had suspected the sincerity of the administration’s arms control efforts. Davis suggested that the accord resulted when the Soviet Union surprisingly agreed to eliminate all intermediate-range systems, calling what Davis saw as the administration’s “zero option” bluff.<sup>4</sup>

The treaty, ironically, was inconsistent with the supposed linkage rationale of the original deployment decision. The view of some at the time was that elimination of all weapons in this range would leave the Soviet Union with serious military advantages in Central Europe and with Europeans still questioning the credibility of the US strategic nuclear guarantee. However, in the long run the INF Treaty proved a positive development at the dawn of revolutionary changes in Europe; factors other than sophisticated strategic theories frequently determine final outcomes in such matters. Arguing that some long range missiles should be kept in Europe for the sake of extended deterrence would have been a non-starter politically when the whole class of weapons could be eliminated. When, a few short years later, the Warsaw Pact disbanded and the Soviet Union disintegrated, the treaty seemed a logical prelude to the European revolutions.

### **Mutual Transatlantic Perceptions and Misperceptions**

Times have changed, but perhaps some basic realities have not. On the Eastern shores of the Atlantic, some Europeans ask why they should spend lives and fortune on America’s war in Afghanistan. Many Europeans believe the United States mishandled the Afghan mission by going into Iraq and thus compromising the contributions other NATO members made in the Afghan theater. In addition, Europeans do not like to invest in defenses against threats they see as conjured up by the United States; they are even skeptical of the threat assessments produced by the European Union’s foreign and defense policy system. Such views are shaping new policy approaches among European powers, particularly in the cases of Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Now that Osama Bin Laden has been killed, the questioning on both sides of the Atlantic has grown.

Germany’s domestic politics can be seen from across the Atlantic as forcing Berlin toward a reduced commitment not only to NATO but also to the European Union’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). A lot of this, it could be argued, comes down to simple populist economics. Germans want to preserve the high standard of living that most of them enjoy. Removing Gaddafi from power and fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan have little relevance to their economic goals. On the other hand, their trade and energy relationship with Russia looks like something that will improve Germany’s economy and the quality of life of Germans. The antagonistic Russian attitude toward NATO could damage these goals.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Stephen Szabo, a leading American expert on Germany, has noted that “...while Germany is crucial to any Western policy consensus on Russia, there are real differences in interests, cultures, and approaches between Berlin and Washington, which could lead to dangerous divisions if not handled well. There is a real danger that without a common approach, Germany could increasingly play the role of mediator between Russia and the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Such a posture would be a radical departure from over 60 years of close cooperation between Germany and the United States on NATO diplomacy with Russia.

Germany’s evolving relationship with Russia could raise the question of whether or not it wants a US-financed deterrent against Russian power, as well as whether the United States will wish to provide such a deterrent in the future. Such declining cooperation between two of NATO’s major powers would worry Estonia and its Baltic neighbors, which are more exposed to Russian power, but this concern is not shared everywhere in Europe.

At the other end of the spectrum, France and Great Britain have recently advanced their bilateral military cooperation,<sup>6</sup> which will enhance their role within the Alliance. For example, they now have leveraged their newfound cooperation into effective international activism in support of removing Gaddafi from power. However, even this success has revealed limitations on their ability to perform such missions: much like the United States, they have voiced frustration that other European countries were not willing or able to do more to support their efforts. After the mission turned out to be much more demanding than expected, they also complained that US reticence was to blame for NATO’s shortcomings. In the process, both Paris and London discovered some of the questionable benefits of leadership that the United States knows all too well. The United States has often been “damned if it did and damned if it didn’t” provide strong leadership for the alliance. Now the French and British have experienced both the highs and lows of taking a strong leadership position.

On the Western shores of the Atlantic, Americans ask why the United States should deploy expensive missile defense systems to defend Europe, when Europeans themselves are unwilling to make serious efforts on behalf of their own defense. Faced with a large and growing deficit, some Members of Congress – both on the left wing of the Democratic Party and among Tea Party Republicans – look at NATO commitments as a prime target for spending cuts. For some, the difficulties of the Libyan mission have only underscored their arguments.

One American commentator, Lawrence F. Kaplan, criticized the Obama administration’s leaving Libya to the Europeans, saying that “someone on the Obama team ought to have inquired about European capabilities – that is, whether the Europeans can do this or, more to the point, [can do] anything at all?”<sup>7</sup> Kaplan quoted French expert Bruno Tertrais as saying that Libya demonstrated

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Stephen F. Szabo, atlantic-community.org, June 16, 2011 (Accessed at: [http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/items/view/Dr. Stephen F. Szabo, Executive Director of the Transatlantic Academy](http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/items/view/Dr._Stephen_F._Szabo,_Executive_Director_of_the_Transatlantic_Academy).)

<sup>6</sup> John F. Burns, “British Military Expands Links to French Ally,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2010 (Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/03/world/europe/03britain.html>).

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Kaplan, “Open Wide, How Libya revealed the huge gap between U.S. and European military might,” *The New Republic*, April 26, 2011 (Accessed at: <http://www.tnr.com/article/crossings/87377/libya-nato-military-power-europe-us>).

that Europe has “no ability to achieve a common political vision and no capacity to take on an operation of this kind.”<sup>8</sup>

It may be true that NATO’s problems in managing the anti-Gaddafi mission are in large part due to fact that the United States took a back seat in the operation. However, President Obama was simply applying the lessons the United States had learned from the past decade of US-led military operations: get an international mandate; do not put the United States in the position of attacking another Muslim country; try to get allies to do as much of the grunt work as possible; and keep US boots off the ground. President Obama also was responding to the message he heard from the American people: tend to our own problems; let the world take care of itself.

Unfortunately, when the administration said it was turning leadership of the mission over to NATO, it helped perpetuate a long-standing flawed view of the alliance: many Americans regard NATO as simply meaning “those damned Europeans,” while at the same time, many Europeans look at the alliance as “those damned Americans.”

### **Importance of the Political Environment for Strategy**

All of this leads to the following question: In this kind of environment, how viable is any deterrence strategy that depends on US generosity, manpower, and weapons systems for its credibility? This question is particularly relevant for extended deterrence. Most Americans don’t understand or buy into the argument that many have made about the need to station troops in Europe to ensure that we can build effective military coalitions through NATO.

Arguments about the need to keep the alliance active and viable for building habits of cooperation and interoperability look to many Americans like “inside baseball,” or a concentration on the obscure details of the relationship – this, at a time, when many Americans think Europeans have become self-satisfied, soft, and increasingly disrespectful of their American cousins.

American governments have had to deal with burden-sharing concerns from the beginning of the alliance. In the late 1940s, the US Congress wanted Germany and Spain to be significant contributors to the alliance in spite of continental concerns at the time about Germany’s recent past and Spain’s authoritarian regime.

In the middle of the Cold War, Senator Mike Mansfield argued that the only way Europeans would take responsibility for their own defense would be to pull US troops out of Europe. The essence of his argument still resonates with Americans who maintain that European countries have fallen into a culture of defense dependence and need to be shocked out of it by the United States leaving European defense to the European Union. One NATO expert put it this way in a recent exchange: “the only way the Europeans will be incentivized is if they know we won't always be there for them.”

Of course, those who hope that CSDP can replace NATO must have had at least a few second thoughts after the discord over Libya. Such doubts have likely grown with the current issue facing

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the European common currency and the political fractures from electoral earthquakes—like the most recent tremors in Finland, where elections revealed rising anti-EU sentiment.<sup>9</sup>

However, it seems clear that developing a deterrence doctrine that is as politically credible as it is strategically sound requires thorough consideration of the transatlantic world in which it is being prepared. At the very least, policymakers need to consider how to structure and sell any deterrence regime to skeptical publics and deliberative bodies on both sides of the Atlantic. The credibility of deterrence will depend on showing how the strategy responds to contemporary political perceptions and realities.

### Questions for Consideration

In constructing a sound and politically acceptable deterrence doctrine, policymakers should consider the following questions. Further review of NATO deterrence may reveal other questions to consider.

- Will revisions to the deterrence strategy include sufficient burden-sharing components to satisfy the United States, while being marketable in Europe? Can the American people be convinced that NATO deterrence strategy is intended to serve American interests, not just to protect those “damned Europeans?”
- What does missile defense in Europe have to do with American security?
- Moreover, if the US does not extend deterrence to its allies, would that create a less demanding and therefore less expensive strategic environment for US defense programs?
- Would the presence or absence of a credible NATO Article V mutual defense commitment affect how European states respond to a serious crisis?
- Will the strategy be credible in terms of threat perceptions? Will it respond to the sometimes differing views Americans and Europeans have of their vital interests?
- Will it be vulnerable to accusations that threats are being manufactured, or at least exaggerated? Can Europeans be convinced that NATO deterrence strategy is based on European as well as American assessments of the threats it intends to deter?
- How will the strategy reconcile the apparent logical disconnect between continued reliance on the threat to use nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear attacks, and the supposed goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons?
- How will the strategy respond to arguments that crises can better be avoided through non-military means, through the more effective use of diplomacy and other soft power tools?

The audience at the Tallinn review conference was not immediately prepared to consider all these questions. One American participant confided that some of the Europeans present had asked whether perceptions of NATO in the United States were really as bad as I had suggested. She

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<sup>9</sup> Jussi Rosendahl, “Anti-Euro Anti-euro populists surge in Finnish election,” *Reuters*, April 17, 2011 (Accessed at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3117086,00.html>).

confirmed to them that my message reflected serious trends in political and strategic thought in the United States.

## The Gates Warning

If the Europeans in the audience needed any further confirmation, it was provided by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his valedictory address to a Brussels audience not long before his scheduled retirement from government service.<sup>10</sup> In previous talks (for example at the 2008 Munich Security Conference), Gates had issued warnings about inadequate European contributions to the alliance. At that meeting, Gates cautioned that "A few allies in NATO shouldn't have the luxury to decide only for stabilization and civilian operations, thereby forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of fighting and dying.... We must not, we cannot, become a two-tiered alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not. Such a development, with all its implications for collective security, would effectively destroy the alliance."<sup>11</sup>

Gates saved his most penetrating points for last, however. In Brussels, home to NATO headquarters, Gates acknowledged that, under current economic and political circumstances, the allies were not likely to increase defense spending to strengthen European contributions to the alliance. However, he pressed for more effective contributions, arguing that "to avoid the very real possibility of collective military irrelevance, member nations must examine new approaches to boosting combat capabilities—in procurement, in training, in logistics, in sustainment."<sup>12</sup>

The warning that was in the headlines almost immediately, however, was stark. Gates concluded his frank talk by observing "...if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."

Gates continued:

"What I've sketched out is the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance. Such a future is possible, but not inevitable. The good news is that the members of NATO—individually, and collectively—have it well within their means to halt and reverse these trends, and instead produce a very different future:

- By making a serious effort to protect defense budgets from being further gutted in the next round of austerity measures;
- By better allocating (and coordinating) the resources we do have; and

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<sup>10</sup> The Gates message was absolutely no conspiracy with this author in spite of the fact that we shared neighboring offices as Deputy National Intelligence Officers in 1974.

<sup>11</sup> "Gates Presses Europeans to Back Afghan Mission," Deutsche Welle, September 2, 2008 (Accessed at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3117086,00.html>).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gates, "NATO's Future," Department of Defense Transcript as published by *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2011. (Accessed at <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/06/10/transcript-of-defense-secretary-gatess-speech-on-natos-future/>).

- By following through on commitments to the alliance and to each other.”<sup>13</sup>

The headlines and editorials that followed elaborated and, unsurprisingly, distorted the Secretary’s message. The most common mistake was to turn the Gates warning into a prediction, without the careful qualifiers in his text. However, the shot across the bow was warranted, and with far more impact than I could have expected in my cautionary note in Tallinn.

### **Implications for Transatlantic Relations<sup>14</sup>**

The American response to the Gates speech has been impressive across the political spectrum. Everyone knows that the alliance is by no means a perfect arrangement, and that free-riding is an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of cooperation between large and smaller powers.

Yet, in spite of all the criticism, there has been a notable shortage of credible proposals for US strategic options other than remaining in close cooperation with its European allies. The United States and its allies certainly need to strengthen the alliance. One way to do so would be to put more emphasis on cooperation in nonmilitary responses to security challenges while encouraging the Europeans to take their military commitments more seriously.

But if the United States tries shock therapy, as some advocates suggest, it might not get the hoped-for results. Individual NATO members might opt to make their own deals—some with other EU members, some with the United States, some with Russia, and so on. Another possibility is that a united Europe might emerge, designed to compete against rather than cooperate with the United States. There are enough uncertainties to suggest that America would be better off trying to improve and strengthen the alliance than dump or devalue it.

When searching for alternatives to NATO, Americans should take a look around the world and ask what other countries would be as willing and able as the European members of NATO to contribute to international security in alliance with the United States. The US faces security challenges in Asia, and has allies in Asia willing to contribute to global security, but there is virtually no potential for an organized alliance there to help the US deal with them. This does not mean that NATO should take on responsibility for Asian security, simply that it is the only viable framework for coordinated military responses to global security challenges, and one with which willing Asian democracies can associate, as they have in Afghanistan.

Before consigning NATO to the scrap heap of history, Americans should consider what they would put in its place and whether it would serve US interests as well. Meanwhile, European governments need to ask themselves if they want to encourage continued US support for the alliance, and, if so, what they are prepared to do to earn it.

The bottom line in all of this is that successful deterrence rests uneasily on perceptions: the perceptions of potential adversaries to be deterred, and of those allies intended to be reassured.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the arguments in the following paragraphs first appeared in: Stanley R. Sloan, “Counterpoint: In Defense of NATO,” *International Herald Tribune/Global New York Times*, June 28, 2011 (Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/29/opinion/29iht-edsloan28.html>).

Perhaps even more important are the perceptions of the providers of extended deterrence, in this case the United States—perceptions that the benefits are worth the risks and costs of providing reassurance.

It is important to remember that the strategic rationales are solid and logically defensible. The credibility of threats and reassurances is affected by whether or not the defense forces and systems are in place, or planned, to implement the chosen strategy. However, whether or not allies still base their policies and actions on a sense of shared values and interests provides the backbone of any NATO-wide deterrence strategy, as well as the credibility of the threats as seen by adversaries.

Today, the Libya mission has raised new questions on top of those already provoked by Afghanistan. The idea that NATO must be relevant to challenges beyond Article V and collective defense blossomed out of the American debate about NATO's future a few decades ago. It now has been accepted as gospel, most recently in the Lisbon strategic concept.

However, there are serious questions about whether the commitment means anything in terms of American and European attitudes and investments. Such questions about transatlantic commitments should be kept fully in mind as allied representatives discuss the inside workings of deterrence strategy, its relevance to the strategic environment in which we live today, and the one we expect to see in years to come.

### **About the Author**

Stanley R. Sloan is Director of the Atlantic Community Initiative, Visiting Scholar at Middlebury College and author, most recently, of *Permanent Alliance? NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain from Truman to Obama* (2010).