

“Global Partnership”: A New Conflict Within NATO?

by Karl-Heinz Kamp

Throughout the last several months, the concept of “Global Partnership” has been causing headaches in the alliance. The United States has been working to implement an institutional framework within NATO in order to intensify global cooperation with the so-called “likeminded states” – states with a Western orientation. This is intended to be one of the primary results of the NATO summit to be held in Riga, Latvia, in November 2006. While Washington views the proposed “Global Partnership Forum” as an important step in modernizing the alliance to face the realities of the post-September 11th world, the majority of European NATO members are critical of the idea of a new committee with global membership. The Europeans’ concerns have arisen partly due to a lack of understanding of the proposed body, not at least a result of the Americans’ insufficient communication of the concept. On the other hand, the idea for the “Global Partnership” has not been given enough thought, and justifiably raises questions. What stands behind the concept of a “global partnership”, what advantages can be attained through it, and which criticisms are in fact compelling?

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1. Partnership in a Crisis

Though the idea of a close partnership with the countries formerly caught in the Soviet sphere of influence was a major reason contributing to the superlative political role of NATO during the 1990s, the changing political landscape of the past several years increasingly put this model under pressure. One example of this can be found in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). Since 1997 it has served as a forum in which the currently 26 NATO member countries can exchange experiences and work on common issues with 20 additional partner countries¹. Though it had originally been conceived as the central institution for dialogue with the “enemies of the past,” the role of EAPC had undergone continual change. One after another, many former EAPC countries became members of NATO. Meanwhile, the remaining partner countries were either disinterested in joining NATO, or did not come into question for the foreseeable future. Thus the carrot of membership in the alliance with which NATO had been enticing individual potential members to conform to its political and military standards began to lose its appeal. In addition, the highly diverse composition of EAPC made it increasingly difficult for NATO to define areas of common interest shared by all partner countries. Some EAPC members, such as Belarus and Uzbekistan, had completely discredited themselves through their flagrant human rights abuses. The role of EAPC was further weakened by NATO's practice of consulting exclusively with countries able to offer troops for the major missions in Afghanistan, in the Balkans, or in the greater Mediterranean region.

Consequently, the monthly meetings of EAPC's 46 ambassadors settled into a mere routine. NATO members complained about partner countries whose contributions were limited to the recitation of previously prepared statements of little import. Conversely, partner countries were perturbed by the lack of information about developments relevant to NATO, which they claimed they were only able to glean from the press. What had at one time been thought of as a key instrument for political and military transformation in Eastern Europe had devolved, especially in the opinion of American critics, to a self-satisfying “debating club” of diminished relevance.

2. Cause of the Conflict

Parallel to the criticism of the existing structure of the partnership, Washington began to express the desire to work more closely with Western-oriented countries outside NATO and beyond the borders of Europe. Though NATO had maintained contacts with countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Japan for many years, the relationship to these so-called “contact countries” had been rather loose in nature.

¹ The countries are: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Croatia, Finland, Georgia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, FYROM, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

In spring of 2004, then-NATO ambassador Nicholas Burns began to campaign for an “extension of the alliance of democracies.” Since then it has become increasingly apparent that the U.S. envisions for NATO a new committee which would include those Western-orientated countries outside of Europe able to contribute to NATO’s military missions around the world. The ramifications associated with these vaguely formulated ideas were at first not recognized, however, by all NATO partners.

The initial spark leading to the current controversy can be traced to a January 2006 speech by the new American NATO ambassador Victoria Nuland at an in-house NATO conference at the NATO school in Oberammergau with representatives of the EAPC countries. Ambassador Nuland combined the desire for a new, global partnership forum with the necessity of reforming the existing partnership forums and appealed openly for the dissolution of EAPC.

The ambassador’s address was generally perceived as overdrawn and inconsistent, both by representatives of the partner countries as well as NATO members. Washington seemed to want to claim the sole right to decide on the fate of an established institution like EAPC. In the weeks that followed, an additional worrisome issue emerged with the realization that members of the Bush administration were considering countries such as Pakistan as potential NATO partners. This seemed to confirm the suspicion that the United States viewed NATO as an instrument of America’s global strategy and as a tool to be employed in fighting the worldwide war on terror.

3. The Logic of the “Global Partnership”

As justified as the critical reaction to the American reform plans may be, there is nonetheless a coherent rationale for extending the partnership concept to the global level. To date the Americans have failed to communicate it sufficiently.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the “partnership” concept served NATO primarily as a political tool for maintaining order. It was the main instrument for the political and military transformation of Eastern Europe and thus for the stabilization of the region east of the borders of the Atlantic Alliance. With the accession of in the meantime 10 Eastern European countries, and a clear perspective for a host of additional applicants, this strategy for maintaining political order has largely been realized.

The challenges facing NATO today are primarily in global military stabilization missions. With missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, the Mediterranean region and Africa, the alliance has long since abandoned its former self-imposed limitation of military actions to the countries of the alliance itself. The driving force securing NATO’s relevance is therefore no longer in exporting democracy to Eastern Europe, but rather in successfully conducting military stabilization operations far beyond the borders of Europe.

From this perspective it appears evident that NATO should pursue partners that both share the basic goals of NATO and possess significant military support capabilities in the respective regions in question. Countries such as New Zealand, which has provided a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) during NATO's mission in Afghanistan, now appear to function in a clear NATO-partner role. Australia, likewise, has provided C-17-Globemaster military transport airplanes in support of NATO operations. Additional militarily relevant partners are Japan, South Korea and Singapore. If these countries support NATO missions, commit significant financial resources, and not lastly put their soldiers' lives on the line, it becomes essential to integrate them beyond simply planning the operations and to incorporate them in the consultation process within NATO itself. For this purpose, a new, permanent forum should be created.

This new approach is different from the previous "partnership" concept in two key areas. First, it is not oriented politically towards maintaining order, but rather has a security focus. Second, it is based on the principle of military capability. Though a number of the previous partners were accepted despite their infinitely meager military potential, the new "Global Partnership" aims at attracting militarily strong states to NATO. The goal is – to put it simply – not the export of democracy to the partnership regions, but the import of support into NATO. The concept thus symbolizes the evolution of NATO from a Eurocentric defense alliance to a globally operational and militarily efficient security institution.

It is also no coincidence that this concept was introduced by the United States and has its strongest European supporter in Great Britain. The most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the U.S. Department of Defense's report to Congress of early February, 2006, is fully in line with the NATO concept. First, it demonstrates the shifting American strategic focus to the Asian-Pacific region. China, which received not a single mention in the previous QDR, is now characterized as the greatest potential challenger of the United States in that region. Second, the authors of the QDR express the goal of transforming "static alliances" into "strategic partnerships" in which the partners are evaluated based on their military contributions. These deliberations are accompanied by the observation that less and less European NATO members possess the military capabilities to operate alongside the United States. This criticism explicitly excludes Great Britain which, along with Australia, for the first time (and as the exclusive countries) are directly incorporated into the report.

4. Open Questions

The Europeans' criticism of the "Global Partnership" idea is based not solely on the fact that the reasoning behind the U.S. initiative has thus far been poorly communicated. The concept itself is not yet fully coherent and raises questions concerning the selection of future partners. The American suggestion to view Pakistan as a partner country, for example, was grounded by pointing to the significant influence of that country on the situation in neighboring Afghanistan. This, however, leaves unclear

what the essential criteria should be for admission to the "Global Partnership." Is it the political proximity of the candidate to the "Western" institution NATO? Is it the level of its military contribution? Or is it the country's strategic relevance – and the strategic relevance for whom? What should happen if the political or strategic importance of a candidate openly contradicts its "compatibility" with the alliance? Who should decide how the planned "Global Partnership Council" is composed? How will the so-called "post-neutral" countries (Sweden, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland), engaged in NATO operations but located in Europe, be incorporated? What role should Russia, as a "special partner" of NATO, receive in the context of a global forum?

In the intervening time since her speech, Washington has distanced itself from the suggestions of U.S. NATO ambassador Nuland, declaring them to be her personal opinion and not policy proposals to be pursued. Instead, methods of dealing with the obvious weaknesses of EAPC, such as the perfunctory nature of the meetings, are under consideration. One option being deliberated is to have the council occasionally meet with a specific constellation according to a pre-selected discussion topic. Under the heading "26+N," the NATO members could, for example, discuss only with those partners with a significant contribution to fighting terror. Given different discussion topics, such as security concerns in the Balkans or stability in the Caucasus, the "N" could mean a different number of partner states. The designation "26+N" could also be used to refer to various other NATO partnership forums, such as countries included in the "Mediterranean Dialogue" (MD) or the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI). Such an alternative to the dissolution of EAPC is widely accepted.

These reform proposals for EAPC do not, however, address the open questions raised by the "Global Partnership." It is therefore incumbent on Washington to furnish the appropriate answers in expectation of the NATO summit in November in Riga.

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