The New Strategic Concept and the Fight Against Terrorism: Challenges & Opportunities

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Abstract: Terrorism is an enduring challenge to international security and stability. In the beginning of the 21st century, the terrorism threat environment has continuously evolved to become more complex and diffuse. It is therefore unlikely that international terrorism will become less of a threat in the coming years. The multi-faceted nature of the terrorism threat demands comprehensive countermeasures and multi-layered cooperation, especially in the area of prevention. This article will elaborate on the current role of NATO in the fight against terrorism and will provide insights into the many opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for the Alliance in combating terrorism and interrelated emerging security challenges following the adoption of the new Strategic Concept.

Keywords: Terrorism, International Security, Cyberattack, WMD, Organized Crime

Introduction

At their November 2010 Lisbon Summit, the NATO Heads of States and Governments adopted a new Strategic Concept that clearly highlights terrorism as one of the enduring security challenges for the Alliance. In the Alliance’s 1999 Strategic Concept, terrorism was identified essentially as a risk affecting NATO’s security. With the adoption of the new Strategic Concept, the Alliance decided to “enhance the capacity to detect and defend against international terrorism, including through enhanced analysis of the threat, more consultations with our partners, and the development of appropriate military capabilities, including help to train local forces to fight terrorism themselves.”

1 Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the NATO, 2010
In addition to the Strategic Concept, the Lisbon Summit Declaration stated clearly that NATO will “continue to enhance both the political and military aspects of NATO’s contribution to deter, defend, disrupt and protect against [terrorism] including through advanced technologies and greater information and intelligence sharing. We reiterate our continued commitment to dialogue and practical cooperation with our partners in this important area.”

The Lisbon Summit was a watershed for the Alliance, as it indicated that emerging security challenges – cyber, energy, proliferation and terrorism – were moving from the periphery towards the centre of the Alliance’s agenda.

The new Strategic Concept lays the groundwork for an Alliance that responds to an increasingly globalized and more complex security environment by becoming more effective, efficient and engaged. More effective, because NATO will invest in key capabilities such as Missile Defence and the protection of information systems. More efficient, because NATO is cutting old fat while building new muscle by transforming itself from a mainly defence Alliance into a multi-faceted security organization. Through investments in smart defence, NATO will have the capacity and the capabilities to deal with multiple threats simultaneously. In the area of counterterrorism, the Alliance will take a holistic approach to address these inter-related and non-traditional threats stemming from the proliferation of WMD, critical infrastructure, cyber attacks, and piracy. In such a threat environment, the promotion of the Alliance’s security is thus best assured through a wide network of partner relationships with countries and organizations around the globe. Therefore, the Alliance will become more engaged by deepening existing partnerships and reaching out to new partners around the globe, as well as other International Organizations.

The Evolving Terrorism Threat Environment

In the NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions of the NATO Standardization Agency, (1989) terrorism is defined as the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.

Terrorism as an illegal tool, method, process and projection of psychological and physical violence presents a continuing threat to the international community. Ten years after the attacks of September 11, the terrorism threat has not diminished as an international security challenge. Instead, the threat posed by terrorism has become increasingly complex and diffuse. As the Strategic Concept underlines, “Terrorism poses a direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries, and to international stability and prosperity more broadly. Extremist groups continue to spread to, and in, areas of strategic importance to the Alliance, and modern technologies increase the threat and potential impact of terrorist attacks, in particular if terrorists were to acquire nuclear, chemical,

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2 Please note that while national terrorist groups are of great concern, the fight against international terrorism will be the focus of this article.

3 Alexander, Yonah, “Contemporary Terrorism: From National to Regional and Global Threats”, in Defence Against Terrorism Review, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2008, pp. 41-46
biological or radiological capabilities. Terrorism reveals new trends and dangers given its capacity for rapid and continuous evolution. First, due to the effects of globalization and increased, the security environment is increasingly affected by hybrid threats. Terrorism intersects with other emerging security challenges, for instance cyber threats, proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, illegal transnational activities such as trafficking in arms, people and narcotics as well as with critical infrastructure protection, maritime, airspace and air transport security. Second, instability or conflict beyond NATO’s borders can foster extremism, terrorism, and transnational illegal activities such as trafficking in arms, narcotics and people. Other factors contributing to the spread of terrorism could be the absence of socio-economic opportunities and the lack of democratic structures. Third, on an international level, Al-Qa’ida (AQ) is still very much in existence and a decentralized network of franchises and affiliates such as AQ in Iraq (AQ-I), AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has become increasingly challenging. Fourth, the spread of modern means of communication, primarily the Internet, has played an important role in the increase of home-grown terrorism. Terrorists use increasingly sophisticated means of propaganda to reach out to potential recruits worldwide.

While “the meaning of the term has changed so frequently over the past decades,” there is no common definition that describes the evolving threat in its entirety. A number of common criteria can be found, however. Terrorists are non-state actors that pursue certain political and/or ideological objectives. For example, AQAP’s stated goal is to cleanse the Arabian Peninsula of foreign influence, particularly from Western military personnel and civilian contractors and to establish a single Islamic caliphate in place of the existing regimes in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Through international networks, terrorist groups thrive on collaboration across national boundaries often on the basis of broadly shared ideologies and commitment. Looking at AQ Central and its affiliates, the connection is often based on personal relationships, primarily ideological and often publicly declared for media effects. With regard to means, terrorists use tactical-level methods, such as modern communications tools, and a broad range of conventional weapons, among them improvised explosive devices, for their strategic-level objectives in order to impact policies of governments and the minds of populations. In general, terrorist groups follow a pattern that is comprised of recruitment, networking, targeting and attack. Furthermore, near-miss operations may be sufficient for terrorists to get their message across and intimidate an audience larger than the immediate victims of the attack. In addition, such operations can force the intended target to adopt expensive countermeasures which can be almost as large an expenditure as after a successful attack. The repercussions of the attacks in the United States in 2001, in Spain in 2004 and in the United Kingdom in 2005 could be felt on a global scale. Responding to the threat posed by terrorism, governments tend to improve intelligence sharing, to introduce legal and financial measures

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4 Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the NATO, 2010.
5 Hoffman, Bruce, “Inside Terrorism”, 2006, p. 3
6 The EU defines as terrorism those acts that, given their natural context, may seriously damage a country or an International Organization, and that are committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population and duly compelling a government or international organization to perform any act. Seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional economic or social structures of a country or an international organization is to be defined as terrorism.
Emerging Security Challenges and Terrorism

The terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has increasingly targeted energy infrastructure. Al-Qaeda Central, in turn, has been actively pursuing Weapons of Mass Destruction. Evidently, terrorism has become increasingly intertwined with other security challenges leading to an environment that is more diverse, rapidly evolving and unpredictable. Some of the key themes in this evolution are briefly summarized in the following section.

Energy Security / Critical Infrastructure Protection and Maritime Security

In the coming years, a return to global economic growth as well as the impact of natural disasters, such as the Japanese earthquake, will continue to put pressure on a number of highly strategic resources, including energy. In light of rising energy demands the availability, reliability, and affordability of energy supplies, the so-called geopolitics of energy, are becoming increasingly important to states. Disrupting energy production and transit are therefore becoming more and more attractive to terrorists and pirates. AQ affiliates in Iraq and Yemen continue to attack energy facilities and supply routes. In Iraq, the Government stated that it needs to increase the number of its 40,000 men strong oil police by 30% in order to protect its oil facilities from terrorist attacks. The protection of energy pipelines, facilities, and shipping from terrorist attacks is therefore a key security concern.

With regard to maritime security, including Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), bottlenecks like the Strait of Malacca and harbor protection, the expansion of violence through the proliferation of piracy and terrorism is another cause for concern. Terrorist groups have conducted multiple attacks in open waters. AQ has demonstrated its reach through high-visibility attacks on the USS Cole and the MV Limburg. With regard to piracy, the United Nations estimates the annual costs in the Indian Ocean to be between $5 billion and $7 billion. While pirates are not regarded as terrorists, connections between AQ-affiliates and the Somali pirates are of growing concern.

Use of Internet and Cyber Attacks

There are multiple ways for terrorists to use information technology to reach their objectives. Terrorists use the Internet as the most effective communication tool around the globe. They exploit the web to indoctrinate and radicalize followers, to gather information for plotting and planning new attacks, or to identify and train like-minded individuals. Therefore, access to the Internet has become increasingly important for terrorists and their supporters. Apart from the operational use of the Internet, terrorists could also attack information networks or computer systems by conducting cyberattacks. Currently, it is estimated that terrorists do not have the means yet to conduct large-scale cyberattacks. As technology is evolving, however, the terrorist threat to cyberspace is also increasing. A terrorist threat could stem from the development and use of a web-based attack strategy aimed at critical infrastructure and information systems. Given the disruptive potential of such an attack, cyber terrorism would fit well into the strategic-level objectives of terrorists.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

President Obama stated that “if an organization like Al-Qaeda got a weapon of mass destruction on its hands — a nuclear or a chemical or a biological weapon — and they used it in a city, whether it’s in Shanghai or New York, just a few individuals could potentially kill tens of thousands of people, maybe hundreds of thousands.” Al-Qaeda’s long-standing interest in acquiring WMD is well known. As Graham Allison points out in “Al-Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction Threat: Hype or Reality?,” Osama Bin Laden assigned members of his network to different tasks in the overall effort of the group to acquire WMD. In order to increase the probability of success of the entire operation, these members were assigned to act and report independently. Furthermore, AQ joined efforts with other terrorist groups, demonstrating that the interest and the motivation to possess WMD goes beyond Bin Laden’s network. So far, the efforts of terrorist groups to acquire or use these weapons have not been successful. A 2008 bipartisan report of the United States’ Commission on the Prevention of Proliferation and Terrorism however asserts that it is likely that terrorists will resort to biological attacks by 2013 if governments fail to undertake major security and preventive measures. For the near future, militant groups may be able to deploy crude CBRN weapons, so-called “dirty bombs,” which are also referred to as “weapons of mass disruption.” Such weapons would cause limited destruction, but would certainly create panic and fear and could lead to major economic disruption. However, even if the use of WMD remains confined to the high end of the threat spectrum, in the words of Harold Agnew, “If you believe that it is easy to make an improvised nuclear weapon, you are wrong. But if you believe it is impossible for a terrorist group to make an improvised nuclear bomb, you are dead.”


10 Harold M. Agnew, a nuclear weapons engineer, became the third US Los Alamos National Laboratory Director in 1970. He also served as Scientific Advisor to NATO.
Nexus with Organized Crime and Narcotics

Weak states can directly threaten international security and stability through the state’s inability to secure its territory, providing opportunities for terrorists to create safe havens and fostering other transnational illegal activities such as trafficking in arms, narcotics and humans. Growing evidence points in the direction of a nexus between terrorist groups and other forms of illicit activities, such as transnational organized crime, illicit trafficking of firearms, money laundering, and drug trafficking. While most of this cooperation appears to be motivated by tactical reasoning, strategic-level cooperation also occurs. For instance, drug trafficking represents a key source for the insurgency led by the Taliban in close interaction with AQ, influencing strategic and operational choices. Moreover, AQIM includes among its sources of financing a wide range of criminal activities, i.e. kidnapping, robbery, racketeering and weapons smuggling.

Challenges and Opportunities

All these developments point in the same direction. First, it is unlikely that terrorism will become less of a threat in the coming years for the Alliance, thereby presenting a shared security concern for all Allies. Second, while counterterrorism measures traditionally rest with national authorities, i.e. law enforcement agencies and intelligence, the asymmetric nature of the terrorism threat and its root causes demand a comprehensive approach.

What is NATO’s contribution to the fight against terrorism? And how must this role evolve in order to counter a changing threat?

It is important to understand how history shaped the Alliance’s response to the fight against terrorism. The Alliance’s previous Strategic Concept, agreed in 1999, had identified terrorism essentially as a risk affecting NATO’s security but no practical measures were agreed by the Allies. This changed with the events of 11 September 2001, an event which shaped NATO’s role in the fight against international terrorism in the early 21st century. Less than 24 hours after the attacks on the United States, NATO invoked Article 5, the collective defense clause of the Washington Treaty, for the first time in the history of the Alliance. The North Atlantic Council – NATO’s principal political decision-making body – agreed that if it determined that the attack was directed from abroad against the United States, it would be regarded as an action covered by Article 5, which states that an armed attack against one or more of the Allies in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all. Furthermore, eight practical measures were adopted by the North Atlantic
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Council to support the United States. Shortly thereafter, NATO launched its first ever counter-terrorism operation – Operation Eagle Assist. On request of the United States, from mid-October 2001 to mid-May 2002, seven NATO AWACS radar aircraft were sent to help patrol the skies over the United States. In October 2001, NATO launched its second counterterrorism operation - Operation Active Endeavour (OAE). OAE is a maritime surveillance operation in the Mediterranean which includes anti-terrorist patrols, escort and compliant boarding.

Following the momentum, NATO’s 2002 Prague Summit demonstrated an increased commitment to counter terrorism, notably with the endorsement of the so-called “Prague Package.” The Prague package aimed at adapting NATO to the challenge of international terrorism. The Alliance adopted a Military Concept for the Defense Against Terrorism (MC 472) that identified four pillars for NATO’s military: first, anti-terrorism combines all defensive and preventive measures taken to reduce the vulnerability of forces, individuals and property to terrorism; second, offensive counterterrorism; third, consequence management; and fourth, military cooperation. Furthermore, the “Prague Package” included five nuclear, biological and chemical defense initiatives; protection of civilian populations; and a Civil Emergency Planning Action Plan as well as the NATO Response Force and the Prague Capabilities Commitment. In Prague, NATO also adopted the Partnership Action Plan against Terrorism that served as a framework document for counter-terrorism work with our Euro-Atlantic Partners. In 2009, the Action Plan was opened to the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative partners on a case-by-case basis.

The 2004 Istanbul Summit reinforced NATO’s determination by adopting further measures. At the Summit, NATO endorsed the creation of the Defense Against Terrorism (DAT) Programme of Work (POW) to improve the response to new security challenges posed by asymmetric threats. Regarding countermeasure technology development, the Defense Against Terrorism Programme of Work enhanced key measures to strengthen the Alliance’s fight against terrorism where technology could help prevent or mitigate the effects of terrorist attacks. Due to the urgency of the challenge, most projects launched under the programme were focused on finding solutions that could be fielded in the near-term, for instance in the areas of countering improvised and force protection. Intelligence sharing was improved through the establishment of the Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit, which became part of the new intelligence structure that was set up as a component of the

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11 The Allies agreed to enhance intelligence sharing and co-operation, both bilaterally and in appropriate NATO bodies, relating to the threats posed by terrorism and the actions to be taken against it, to provide, individually or collectively, as appropriate and according to their capabilities, assistance to Allies and other states which are or may be subject to increased terrorist threats as a result of their support for the campaign against terrorism; to take necessary measures to provide increased security for facilities of the United States and other Allies on their territory; to defend selected Allied assets in NATO’s area of responsibility that are required to directly support operations against terrorism; to provide blanket clearance for the United States and other Allies’ aircraft, in accordance with the necessary air traffic and national procedures, for military flights related to operations against terrorism; to provide access for the United States and other Allies to ports and airfields on the territory of NATO nations for operations against terrorism, including for refuelling, in accordance with national procedures; that the Alliance is ready to deploy elements of its Standing Naval Forces to the Eastern Mediterranean in order to provide a NATO presence and demonstrate resolve; and that the Alliance is similarly ready to deploy elements of its NATO Airborne Early Warning Force to support operations against terrorism.
ongoing intelligence reform efforts. In endorsing the Comprehensive Political Guidance at the Riga Summit in November 2006, NATO recognized that “terrorism, together with the spread of weapons of mass destruction, are likely to be the principal threats to the Alliance over the next 10 to 15 years.”

In sum, the most important strands of NATO’s work undertaken in the realm of counterterrorism up until the Strategic Concept 2010 were political consultations among Allies, the conduct of operations, the management of possible consequences of terrorist attacks, and the development of countermeasure technologies, intelligence and information exchange, as well as the provision of training and exercises for Allies. NATO also sought closer cooperation with partners and other international organizations to counter terrorism.

There are various important lessons learned from the past decade. First, due to differences among Allies in defining terrorism – as an enemy or as a crime – a coherent approach to “fight the menace” has been difficult to agree upon. Regardless of the definition, however, the international community learned that terrorism can only be effectively countered through a mix of soft and hard power. This being said, the role of the military, while undeniable, is mainly, and should only be, supportive to political, diplomatic, legal, and (socio)-economic efforts. Second, the fragmented nature of the counterterrorism effort within NATO and the organizational culture pose a unique challenge for developing a coherent response to terrorism. For instance, Allies have not sufficiently engaged on exchanging views on broader security developments and threats such as terrorism or proliferation of WMD. Third and partly as a result of this underdeveloped consultation process, NATO has played mainly a reactive role in the fight against terrorism. Fourth, NATO has given too much attention to operations and military technology and had too little focus on what arguably is the key to effective counterterrorism, namely the preventive dimensions as well as coordination with other international efforts. Fifth, cooperation with partner nations and other international organizations has not been exploited to the full. For example, NATO has not taken local capacity building of partners sufficiently into account, although this has emerged as a vital component of prevention in the fight against terrorism.

Prospects of NATO’s Role in the Fight Against Terrorism After the Lisbon Summit

The new Strategic Concept reaffirmed NATO’s role as the unique and essential transatlantic forum for consultations and dialogue and set out collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security as core tasks of the Alliance. In the fight against terrorism, NATO can and must do more than it has been doing thus far. Needless to say, NATO’s overall role as an international organization in this effort is embedded in the broader effort of the international community led by the United Nations and supported by many other international, regional and sub-regional organizations. The task ahead is clear. If the Alliance wants to remain an effective security provider for its members contributing to the prevention of 21st century security threats, it must become more of a team player – outside its borders and within its borders. However, turning intentions into tangible policies will require a lot of hard work. NATO has only just begun to embark on this journey and different security priorities among Allies will not ease this journey. But the Alliance, a political-military organization, has more to offer than military power and capabilities alone. It has a legitimate role to play in the fight against terrorism by focusing on comprehensive measures in the civilian and military domains that include protection and prevention, not only emergency preparedness and consequence management.
First and foremost, as NATO is transforming from a defense alliance into a multi-faceted security organization, Allies need to change the way they think about terrorism and other emerging security challenges. For instance, the prevention of terrorism can only be achieved if Allies are sharing information with each other and consult with each other on terrorism and other emerging security challenges. This being said, I firmly believe that NATO’s political horizon and consultations should not only be dependent on action and troops on the ground. Engaging in thematic discussions on international security would allow NATO to raise awareness about emerging threats, to apply lessons learned and to create an organizational culture that it needs in the security environment of the 21st century.

Second, NATO needs to broaden and deepen the number of initiatives to counter terrorism, taking into account cross-cutting threats stemming from cyber, energy, proliferation, instability and conflict in cooperation with Allies and its partners. To this end, NATO is reviewing its capabilities and countermeasure technologies in order to enhance its capacity to detect and defend against international terrorism. The aim is to alter NATO’s ability to quickly and effectively respond to the evolving threat environment. Third, training, exercises and capacity-building are of great importance and the Alliance will need to use its assets more efficiently in order to leverage NATO’s expertise and overall contribution to the fight against terrorism. In this realm, important assets of the wider NATO family are the Centres of Excellences. Centres of Excellences are international military organizations that work alongside Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk, Virginia, in the United States. Although not part of the NATO command structure, they are part of a wider educational and training framework. Designed to complement the Alliance’s current resources, Centres of Excellences cover a wide variety of areas, with each one focusing on a specific field of expertise what goes beyond what NATO HQ is able to provide. Engaging this network of centers more closely in NATO’s work in the fight against terrorism will provide a tangible improvement to NATO capabilities. For instance, the Defense Against Terrorism (DAT) Centre of Excellence in Ankara, Turkey, provides subject matter expertise and training on how to best to counter terrorism, assists in the development of doctrine and helps to improve NATO’s and partners’ capabilities and interoperability.

Fourth, the Strategic Concept stresses the Alliance’s preparedness to develop political dialogue and practical cooperation with relevant organizations across the globe that share NATO’s interest in peaceful international cooperation. By recognizing the reality that coordination with other international actors is essential, NATO has taken a further necessary step to fulfill its key security tasks. Allies are required to seek new ways of connecting NATO with the broader international community by building structured relations in order to add value to the global effort undertaken in the fight against terrorism. In line with the comprehensive approach, NATO will improve its coordination with other international organizations through regular exchanges of views and information as well as by enhancing mutual knowledge of working processes to leverage the full potential of each stakeholder and to establish a pattern of cooperation and dialogue. In my personal view, the European Union is a unique and essential partner for NATO in the fight against terrorism, as both organizations share a majority of members and all members share common values. In order to realize a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism and deliver the best results for their citizens in times of diminishing resources, NATO and the EU must aim to deepen and broaden cooperation in the field of information exchange, streamline capability development and external assistance to
partners in all areas necessary. The United Nations is another key partner for NATO that offers much more in the fight against terrorism than merely a framework of legitimacy for the actions of the Alliance. NATO is and will actively support the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy as well as other relevant UN Resolutions. Participation in regional and international efforts, for example at the Regional Expert Meetings on the Implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy or the Special Meeting of the UN Counterterrorism Committee with international, regional and sub-regional foci, demonstrates NATO’s firm commitment to the global fight against terrorism. Last but not least, the prevention of international terrorism can be best achieved through engaging with a wide range of partners. NATO has today more than 30 partner countries that participate in more than 1,500 activities annually. Depending on individual programmes, NATO will strengthen its partnerships in the fight against terrorism. The Alliance will seek to enhance consultations, information sharing, leverage lessons learned and provide tailor-made training, exercises and courses that support national, regional and international efforts in countering terrorism. Through tools such as the Science for Peace and Security Programme, NATO will further reach out to civilian actors in partner countries to promote projects and events in areas such as human-behavioral science, cyber terrorism, the protection of critical infrastructure and the detection and defense against CBRN terrorism.

Conclusion

The dynamic and evolving nature of the international terrorism threat requires that the Alliance’s response is comprehensive and flexible. Implementing the levels of ambition embodied in the Strategic Concept, NATO will seek innovative ways to demonstrate the added value it can provide to the protection of the Alliances’ populations against these challenges. The establishment of the Emerging Security Challenges Division in the International Staff at NATO is a good start. In responding to these 21st century challenges, a new approach of protection, prevention and partnering will allow NATO to continuously adapt to the complex and diffuse threat environment while effectively countering terrorism and addressing its root causes. Coordination with all strands and stakeholders within the Alliance as well as with partners, other international organizations and networks involved will be key to realize the Alliance’s mission. NATO will ensure that the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, and security and shared values and continues to be effective in a changing world, against new threats, with new capabilities and new partners.