NATO and its Profile During and after the Cold War-era

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Abstract

By now it is clear that NATO is a powerful organ to execute missions outside its borders. The alliance survived because it has gone through a change of its goals and strategies over the years and thereby adapted to new circumstances. Democracy, stability, security and peace have been and are still its main goals. To achieve these it was important to change from confrontation to cooperation and combine military force with diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. Today NATO has even expanded its actions to further regions, such as the mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993, Afghanistan, counter-piracy in the Gulf of Aden and combating cyber-attacks.

Keywords: Arms Race, Cold War-era, Democracy, NATO, NATO profile

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established in 1949 in the aftermath of World War II. Through the decades of its existence, NATO went through major changes.

Probably one of the most importance was after the breakdown of the Soviet Union around 1990. Therefore, the question 'How did the NATO change its profile after the fall of the Soviet Union in order to survive the changes in Europe and the world?' will be examined in the article in order to do so, the following issues will be outlined: on what basis NATO was created, which goals it initially tried to achieve and how these goals were reached. The article will then look into the time around 1990, the fall of the Berlin Wall and how missions for the post-Cold War NATO looked like. Thus, there will be concluded with the major changes that NATO went through.

Why NATO?

Post World War II Europe didn't look very bright. Entire cities and areas were devastated resulting in huge refugee camps. Millions of people died in the war leaving thousands of orphans behind and food was rationed. Moreover, Europe was split into East and West while the West feared communism spreading across the continent. The Soviet Union appeared as a threat to the mostly democratic West. Therefore Western countries was the need to build an alliance to appear more powerful. In 1949 Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark and Iceland signed the North Atlantic Treaty. It was largely seen as a defense alliance and therefore meant to counter Soviet expansion. Article 5 states that "an armed attack against one or more of the allies shall be considered an attack against all of them" (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949).

The USA played a special role in NATO from the beginning due to its immense military and economic power. Its presence in Europe had to prevent a revival of nationalist militarism. Though defense and military cooperation was an important aspect of the treaty, it also provided a basis for economic and political cooperation. Europe needed to stand on its own legs again and thus had to work together. Shortly after the NATO members were confronted with the first detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviets and the outbreak of the Korean War it was clear that the alliance needed a common command structure which was eventually created.

NATO during the Arms Race and Cold War

1955 was a significant year. Only ten years after World War II West-Germany joined NATO. The Soviet Union saw this act as a major offence against the union, which resulted in the establishment of the 'Warsaw Pact' bringing together the Soviet-ruled countries.

If not before, it was no clear that the Soviet Union and NATO were concrete counter-parts which tried to keep peace by appearing more powerful than the other. On NATO side it led to its first strategy concept: Massive Retaliation (Wallander, 2000, p. 707). In case of a military strike against the alliance they would answer with a massive counterattack including full nuclear weapons exchange. This strategy showed an intent to dissuade the Soviet from an attack against Western Europe because of the catastrophe that would follow. Hence another war seemed unlikely and the allies could concentrate on the recovery of their economies. A status-quo

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had been achieved.

In the 1960's NATO went through another change. 'Flexible Response' replaced 'Massive Retaliation' (Hoffmann, 2008, p. 37) as a strategy and meant a more flexible army. Just as Willy Brandt's 'launched Ostpolitik' the NATO leaders now felt as if they must change the status-quo, encouraging cooperation between the East and the West. The 'Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance' called for a dialogue which eventually succeeded with the 'Helsinki Final Act' signed in 1975. It was an agreement for basic freedoms of individuals and was also signed by the Soviet Union.

Through the decades from its birth until the turning point in 1990 NATO accomplished its task to preserve peace in Europe - despite some interim rebounds - by its sheer existence which embodied a power that was impossible to fight against.

The Change around 1990

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the reunification of Germany in 1990, the fall of the Soviet Union and thereby the disestablishment of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 removed the concrete enemy for NATO from the scene. It meant an opening of the world towards 'The East'. The organization was now in question because, as many argued, there was no need for a strong military counterpart to the Soviet Union anymore to keep peace across Europe and thus no further need for NATO.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, a lot of countries claimed independence. Many of them saw their future in Europe and not in partnership with Russia, NATO could be a catalyst in that cause. But this also meant the possibility of new countries, such as Ukraine, owning nuclear weapons that had been based on their territory during the Cold War era. Among others, former President of the U.S. George H. W Bush addressed this fear and even encouraged some countries not to claim independence right away (Duffield, p. 774). On top of that the question was raised whether European countries would go back to nationalism resulting in conflicts among some of the states again. For NATO it caused a re-evaluation of its purpose and the need to find new functions.

As we know today, NATO survived but the Warsaw Pact didn't. Why is that? The latter was merely a military union and represented a combined force. NATO, however, even though it was largely perceived as a military force, too, also encouraged cooperation, democratization and political integration among its members and beyond. Furthermore NATO acquired assets in all aspects of a powerful institution on political and military level.

Concrete Changes

First NATO's change in strategy did not come overnight and is not something to a single event. It was a constant development during the 1990's which resulted in a certain way of working and experienced another twist on 9/11 showing that it is still in a process of adopting.

NATO became a more dynamic and responsive organization, by extensively downsizing its military apparatus and command structure. Only a few headquarters remained. Additionally a shift in staff took place. Had it been the USA providing most of the leading offices, now European countries gained more importance and filled high-ranked positions.

Following the détente approach from the 60's (Wallander, 2000, p. 730), NATO now opened up even more to nonmembers. Ultimately NATO thought that its future task will be to create, sustain and enable democracy across Europe, not only within the organization. This aimed for sustainable stability and Euro-Atlantic peace. NATO believed that instability in neighboring countries and other regions might affect the security of the alliance. This assumption would be harshly proven by the 9/11 events. Also, freedom did not only mean the absence of war anymore but one's personal freedom from any violent act, including the government. It appeared necessary to allow non-members to work with NATO without actually joining the alliance. Therefore several programs and institutions were created over the years. NATO expanded its cooperation in all directions via Partnership for Peace, The Mediterranean Dialogue, The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and The NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. (Duffield, p. 780). This represents a major shift in NATO's task: NATO saw its obligations beyond its borders.

Conclusion

By now it is clear that the NATO was a powerful organ to execute such missions outside its borders. The alliance survived because it went through a change of its goals and strategies over the years and thereby adapted to new circumstances. Democracy, stability, security and peace have been and are still its main goals. To achieve these it was important to change from confrontation to cooperation and combine military force with diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. After the fall of the Soviet Union NATO has gone through the serious changes – it revealed flexibility in its major actions in the ongoing world political events.

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