

The New Strategic Concept: important, not impressive

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This article reacts on the special section of *Atlantisch Perspectief* no. 8, 2010 about the NATO Lisbon summit.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen has announced that the NATO Lisbon summit in November 2010 was 'historic.' To support his claim, NATO's Secretary-General offered three reasons. First and foremost, a new Strategic Concept was adopted outlining NATO's mission for the coming decade. Second, the summit signalled a rapprochement between NATO and Russia, including a possible deal on missile defence and a first-time visit by President Medvedev to the North Atlantic Council. Third, the Alliance reconfirmed its commitment to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan but declared to start transferring security responsibilities to the Afghan government.

Among these three accomplishments at the summit, the new Strategic Concept stands out. After all it is this renewed mission statement that makes it possible for the second and third topics to move forward. NATO's new Strategic Concept outlines both a renewed relationship with Russia and a confirmation to remain engaged in crisis-management operations and training missions, such as Afghanistan. The question then becomes whether the summit and particularly the Strategic Concept it produced is indeed as extraordinary as Rasmussen claimed. To answer this question, three elements must be considered: does the document stipulate a new direction for the Alliance, is the Concept unique content-wise, and are there any major issues left unaddressed?

Avoiding choices

Among the first things that become apparent when reading the Concept is its relatively small, digestible size. The Cold War Strategic Concepts were voluminous, often specific in their level of detail, and generally technical in nature. "Active Engagement, Modern Defence" is easier on the eyes, and on the environment. Counting eleven pages of rolling text it contrasts to the bureaucratic staccato we have come to associate with strategy documents. This Concept reads like a policy paper, a welcome change to the forty-page tomes published during the Cold War. Even compared to the previous two post-Cold War Concepts, Rasmussen's pen is a breath of fresh air.

Turning to content though, comparing the new Strategic Concept to the concepts of lore, it is striking how much flexibility this document provides. With twenty-eight allies, as Karl-Heinz Kamp pointed out in his article last month, the Strategic Concept had to be short and sweet.¹ Rather than specify NATO's ambitions and how it intends to realise them over the next ten years, the document's audience had to be convinced of the sustained commitment among the Alliance's member states. The notion that the Concept is a tool of strategic communication, for 'marketing the Alliance,' proved crucial. Kamp points out that the Strategic Concept, amongst others, is meant to win "the battle of narratives" waged to convince the illustrious 'milkman from Omaha' and sceptical domestic publics that NATO

remains useful in the 21st century. He furthermore points out that this served consensus-building during the process of drafting the document. Phrased differently, it avoided dealing with the hard questions. The issue of Russia, considered a strategic challenge by some and a strategic partner by others, was left ambiguous. NATO will reach out to Russia while at the same time reassuring its Eastern European member states. While this sounds sensible, in practice it creates a lot of room for misperception in Warsaw or Tallinn when NATO reaches out to Moscow, and vice versa when the former need to be reassured. The Concept declares that “NATO poses no threat to Russia” yet NATO’s reconfirmed Open Door policy does present a strategic challenge to Russia’s Near Abroad, especially in Moscow’s eyes. Navigating this ambiguity will require more diplomacy from the Secretary-General over the coming years than anything else. With Russia, but also within the Alliance.

A second issue to which only scant attention is paid, is the changing global security context resulting from the global financial crisis. The advent of a multipolar world presents NATO with significant challenges. Not in the least since NATO will risk being perceived more and more by outsiders as a military bloc, instead of the network of security partnerships, also called ‘NATO 2.0,’ it aspires to be.

Marginally addressed, yet of crucial importance to the future of the Alliance, is the allied level of defence spending. The necessity to maintain specific levels of defence spending and connected with it, the strategic impetus to move forward on integrating European defence capabilities, receives little attention. The Concept underwhelms at this point. It declares that the Alliance will sustain “the necessary levels of defence spending,” without clarifying what “necessary” is or how this can be achieved. Of course defence spending should not be pursued for spending’s sake, but on the eve of the summit, NATO’s Secretary-General complained that European defence budget cuts risked turning Europe into a “paper tiger.”² Apparently such harsh words failed to make it to the final draft.

A period of financial austerity is the bitter reality in which Western militaries will have to make do in the next decade. As defence budgets in China, Brazil, India, but also across the Middle East, steadily increase, NATO’s European defence budgets are in a downward spiral. While this may lead to some much-needed rationalisation within NATO’s structures, this is hardly enough. To ensure that NATO officials and national policymakers have their eye on the ball and deal with this reality, requires explicitly addressing it in such a strategic-level document.

The Strategic Concept does task the Alliance to focus on emerging security challenges, including cyber-threats, missile defence and energy security. This is a welcome addition to NATO’s priority set in light of current security issues. Inevitably, this will lead to new capability requirements that must be met. Yet again, with NATO’s transformation to an expeditionary alliance effectively dead in the water due to financial, military and political reasons, it remains to be seen how common capabilities for these new issues will be developed. Rather than taking this issue to head, answering the question is postponed.

The ambiguity, outlined above, inherent in the new Concept leaves a lot of room for different interpretations and diverging expectations. It also leaves ample room for shifting opinions as history progresses. On a positive note this enables the Alliance to cope with the uncertainties and surprises it is likely to encounter in the next ten years without having to

write a new document. Avoiding putting everything on paper, provides an incentive and an opportunity for active diplomacy. So to speak, the Strategic Concept sketches the core principles of NATO's new orientation, rather than etches them in stone. This however makes execution and implementation, rather than the document itself, the crucial litmus test for NATO's posture in the 2010's.

Better together

A second overarching issue is that the content in the Concept is not really new. Kamp describes the Concept as a "mission statement." A mission statement however is not a strategy, instead it is a declaration of intent. The Concept strongly resonates the spirit of the "Declaration on Alliance Security," the senior-level document adopted at the 60th anniversary of the Alliance. As it happens, that Declaration was also devised as a strategic communications tool to keep all the Allies and their populations on board. In fact, the 2009 document reads as an executive summary of the new Strategic Concept. Several elements appear in the Concept, considered by commentators to be key elements or novelties, which were previously outlined in the Declaration. The centrality of Article 5 and collective defence, and the need to address cyber-threats, challenges to energy security and climate change, were all mentioned in the Declaration. Developing partnerships is a core feature of the new Strategic Concept. Yet the Declaration also endorses reaching out and developing new partnerships with other international and regional organisations, such as the EU, UN, OSCE and African Union. Similarly the Declaration affirms that NATO's door remains open to new members and an outreach to Russia is equally part of this prelude to the Concept. Certainly, the Strategic Concept is more elaborate and it has a different status being the Alliance's high-level strategic document. Nevertheless, because it continues where the Declaration on Alliance Security left off, it loses part of its unique sparkle.

Stepping on toes

NATO's relations with partners stood paramount at the summit. Of particular concern were relations with the European Union, a topic the Concept rightly addresses. However, while NATO officials and heads of state make public statements committing to improve the dysfunctional relation with the EU, in the Strategic Concept the kernels are present for continued strife between the two organisations. NATO's initiatives in the field of civilian capabilities will leave those that favour a more balanced relationship with the EU, anxious.

The Concept expresses a high level of ambition, particularly in the area of contributing to conflict prevention. For these purposes, a civilian crisis management capability as well as developing a pool of civilian specialists is proposed. It is understandable that NATO wants a civilian capability to interface with NGO's and other civilian counterparts in the field to give shape to its Comprehensive Approach. Yet the proposal puts an end to the possibility of achieving a "reverse Berlin Plus" - a system whereby NATO relies on the EU's civilian capabilities - which could stimulate interdependence rather than competition between the two organisations. While NATO has always committed to avoiding duplication with the European Union, it now risks duplication by building a civilian capability of its own. Instead of a division of labour where NATO does the cooking and the EU does the dishes, it appears as though NATO now also wants to have control over the detergent. If NATO develops a stand-alone civilian capacity, it risks making the EU's role in cooperating with the Alliance in

complex emergencies all but irrelevant. Rather than give rise to a new romance in Brussels, stepping on the EU's toes may ruin the uneasy mating dance going on between the two organisations.

Much remains unclear

One of the obvious changes in the Concept is that aside from 'Article 5' territorial defence and 'non-Article 5' crisis management operations, NATO has broadened its strategic horizon to include protecting the safety of its population and its economic interests. The Alliance refers to this as 'fundamental security.' In practice this implies that energy security and cyber defence become an integral part of the Alliance's security efforts. Ballistic missile defence should also be seen in this light. Defending against the risk of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), delivered by terrorists or lobbed onto Allied cities atop a ballistic missile, lies within this same category of population-centric security. As does focusing on economic security, particularly through NATO's ambition to promote protecting the global commons by securing energy transit routes and cyber-space. Of course, NATO's standing naval forces already have the capacity to contribute to energy security. It therefore remains to be seen what protecting "critical energy infrastructure and transit areas" means in terms of new capabilities or doctrine. In addition, a NATO cyber centre of excellence has already been established, yet the Concept alludes to new capabilities in this field. Many details remain to be addressed how these initiatives will be given shape.

The Summit Declaration rather than the Concept offers some insights. It details the busy schedule the Alliance has been given to provide substance to the initiatives launched in the Concept, or that were left unresolved. In the coming months the North Atlantic Council will not only assess NATO's counter-WMD programme (by June 2011), draft a plan for missile defence (by June 2011), prepare a cyber-action plan (by June 2011), and prepare a report on energy security (by December 2011). It will also develop a plan for an EU-NATO strategic partnership (by April 2011), a political-military framework for partnering with other countries (April 2011), a new political guidance on force transformation (by March 2011), a plan for cost-effective capability development (by March 2011), and a plan for reducing NATO's organisational size (by June 2011). These follow-on actions will be the true 'proof of the pudding' for the new Strategic Concept.

An Emergent Strategy?

In short, much remains "emergent" about NATO's new Strategic Concept. As Jamie Shea writes, the Concept is "only as good as the willingness of NATO to implement it."³ This leads to wonder how we should appreciate the Concept. The Strategic Concept is a mission statement, not a strategy. It outlines what the Alliance should do, and leaves it to follow-on ministerials to decide how to do it. On crucial issues, in terms of the steps to take and the choices to make, it favours diplomatic ambiguity over strategic clarity thereby preparing the alliance for new rounds of political discussions, misperception and disagreements. And on several crucial topics, such as the impact of the financial crisis on defence budgets and the changing balance of power in the world, the Concept remains eerily, and perhaps irresponsibly, quiet.

Former Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said following the Iraq-crisis in 2003 that the Alliance had to become more of a political forum and discuss common security issues in order to find common ground. With new ambitions articulated and limited agreement on how to proceed, turning NATO into a political alliance has now become inevitable. Does all this make the Strategic Concept extraordinary or historic? No, but luckily for the Alliance, that does not make it any less important.

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1. Karl Heinz Kamp, 'NATO's strategy after the Lisbon summit,' in *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 8-2010.
2. James G. Neuger, 'NATO says Europe risks becoming 'paper tiger' on cuts,' *Bloomberg*, 19 November 2010.
3. Jamie Shea, 'Why does NATO's new Strategic Concept matter?,' in *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 8-2010.