

NATO and the trap of success

Do-it-yourself crisis making

By **Ko Colijn**

It is a well known anecdote that NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was inaugurated back in 1949 with a small ceremony in the Department of State, during which the house orchestra played George Gershwin's *I Got Plenty of Nothing*. Indeed, diplomats of a dozen member countries raised their champagne glasses and congratulated each other with promises, not guarantees.

The suggestion of nothing, even plenty of it, seems a dubious way to recognize an institution that otherwise may claim to have brought plenty of peace for almost 60 years. Political scientists like Karl Deutsch have hailed the North Atlantic area as a zone of peace, a region that has at least succeeded in averting war from outside and in resolving internal conflicts peacefully.

A success indeed for NATO as an institution, insofar as it has helped facilitate this remarkable process. However, it is recognized that despite this success NATO has also had to cope with various internal struggles, as members engaged in turf battles with familiar labels such as 'burden sharing' and 'free riding'. The only good news is that these internal problems have somehow been managed without undermining the institution itself. But exhaustive they are, and voluminous is the solidarity literature on the alliance during its history.

The Cold War over, NATO has adopted a new mission as 'global security provider'. Shoulder-to-shoulder with the global development community, it offers security, preferably shored up by solid legal mandate, to people who qualify for external military intervention. It is interesting to learn that, in this new and noble mission, the solidarity problem seems far from over. However, it has shifted from quarrels over members' defence expenditures (input solidarity) to their actual performance on the battlefield or along the ceasefire line (output solidarity). That is not surprising, given that the nature of global security management has also shifted from input to output performance over the last 15 years. The stand-off between the superpowers during the Cold War, fortunately, did not lead to actual combat or military confrontation, whereas the period since then has seen a spectacular rise in peacekeeping and peacemaking operations during which physical involvement of forces was needed rather than their simple – and sometimes virtual – availability.

Déjà vu?

In Afghanistan, the solidarity crisis seems to be even more acute and 'déjà vu' than ever. After 9/11 the Bush administration cold-shouldered NATO by simply sidelining it as the preferred instrument. Operation Enduring Freedom – the war on terror beginning with the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001 and never-ending with its hunt for al Qaeda – was not a NATO operation. In 2003, calling on NATO for the ill-fated Iraq intervention was not considered ('it didn't even cross my mind',



said Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in a famous one-liner). Yet NATO got the command of the UN-backed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, the Afghanistan-wide operation that was supposed to stabilize the country after the war (Operation Enduring Freedom) was over.

Rather than proving its ability to cope with the Afghanistan challenge, the mission has now turned against the institution itself and seems to have derailed into a 'save-the-NATO' operation. In adopting a 'can't afford to fail' policy, the institution has become self-threatening. Not only Afghanistan, but the institution itself is at stake. The 'can't afford to fail' style of pressure politics obscures the various national debates on participating in ISAF in the first place, and on fair risk sharing next.

Even at the level of single nation's decision making, one can observe this politics of litmus testing. In October 2006 Victoria Nuland, US ambassador to NATO, forced the issue to its limits by saying: 'If we can't do missions like that of Afghanistan, then we can't do our overall mission'. On the eve of the subsequent NATO summit in Riga, former British prime minister Tony Blair declared that NATO's credibility was at stake in Afghanistan, as was even 'the future of world security in the early 21st century'.

One may call it the trap of success. For all the virtues institutions display in conflict management, they also run the risk of becoming obstacles in their own right. Once institutions play the game of litmus politics, they may become self-generating crisis machines. ■

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- Ko Colijn (2007) *Litmus Politics: Afghanistan, the Netherlands and NATO*, Roosevelt Lecture, Roosevelt Study Centre, Middelburg, 10 October 2007