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# Recasting NATO's Strategic Concept

Possible Directions for  
the United States

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Prepared for the United States Air Force

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



PROJECT AIR FORCE

The research described in this report was sponsored by the United States Air Force under Contract FA7014-06-C-0001. Further information may be obtained from the Strategic Planning Division, Directorate of Plans, Hq USAF.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** is available for this publication.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4873-8

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Published 2009 by the RAND Corporation  
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## Summary

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To address the security challenges it faces, the United States will need the active support of its allies. This means, in particular, ensuring that the states joined in NATO remain able and willing to make a contribution to resolving their common security problems wherever possible. The current revision of NATO's strategic concept offers an excellent opportunity to further this aim. It is a chance to build consensus about the future and thereby steer the alliance in a direction that will help keep it relevant.

The alliance has long provided its member states with considerable power and influence in world affairs. It offers the citizens of its member states a level of confidence that they will live their lives in peace and with security. It is a cornerstone of the transatlantic relationship and a repository of members' shared history. For all these reasons, an effort to sustain the alliance is worthwhile. Recent years, however, have seen strategic drift within the alliance and disagreements over its basic purposes. The revision of the strategic concept must, on the most basic level, revitalize the alliance by defining a suitable set of purposes that it will serve in the future.

This paper is a contribution to this effort. It examines five possible directions—refocus on Europe, new focus on the greater Middle East, focus on fragile states, focus on nonstate threats, and a global alliance of liberal democracies—for the alliance in the next ten to 15 years, assessing them against certain key political and military criteria. The purpose is to offer those involved in the rewrite both a range of potential options and a preliminary assessment of the feasibility and potential implications of each. In contrast with the revision process, which will invariably begin with the political and bureaucratic constraints the alliance faces and work within these, we attempt a fresh, bottom-up look at what NATO might do, then examine benefits and drawbacks, including political constraints.

### **What Are Some of the Key Benefits and Problems of Each of the Five Directions?**

#### **Refocus on Europe**

There are several reasons the alliance might choose to refocus on Europe. One is uncertainty regarding the future course of Russian foreign and security policy; another is continued instability in the Balkans; and a third is the fact that NATO's ability to serve European security is well proven. A return to Europe might provide relief from Afghanistan and signal a period of regeneration for the alliance. There is no doubt that NATO can be effective in Europe. There is one major problem, however, with this direction: There is little in it for the United States.

Indeed, if NATO were to return to Europe, the United States could gradually lose interest in the alliance, undermining its credibility over time. While the strategic concept will surely want to reflect NATO's continued commitment to European security, it will need to do far more. (See pp. 5–8.)

### **New Focus on the Greater Middle East**

An alternative direction that has been considered in the past, but never fully developed, is a new focus on the greater Middle East, or, as the French have called it, the “zone of crisis” that stretches from the Sahara through Pakistan. Here is the area of the world where the most threats to allied security originate, be they threats to allied nations' energy supplies, threats from terrorist groups, or threats from the proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. From the perspective of classical alliance theory, the Middle East is the obvious place to focus the alliance. Unfortunately, the political difficulties that any such focus would involve are manifold and may be so great as to be prohibitive. A NATO focused on peaceful change in the Middle East may not be a realistic option. This fact, however, points to the inherent challenge of finding a meaningful focus for NATO: If the alliance cannot serve the interests of its members in the Middle East, maintaining the alliance's vitality may prove difficult. (See pp. 9–12.)

### **Focus on Fragile States**

Another direction the alliance might adopt involves fragile and failed states. It is now widely, though not unanimously, agreed that failed states are the wellspring of several of the forces that threaten allied security today. NATO, moreover, is currently involved in an extensive effort to strengthen the fragile Afghanistan state. If the allies fail there, there may be little point in considering other directions, given the impact that failure would have on U.S. attitudes toward the alliance. A strategic concept that focused attention on the problem of failed states would simply be a recognition of a major task that NATO has already undertaken and would be beneficial for this reason alone. The difficulties the alliance has encountered in Afghanistan, however, are precisely those it might encounter in making failed states a major future focus. Nevertheless, not doing so could have serious consequences for allied unity. (See pp. 13–16.)

### **Focus on Nonstate Threats**

A fourth direction includes nonstate threats. Just as most security analysts now recognize the importance of failed states, most also recognize the importance of nonstate threats. NATO could choose to give new emphasis to nonstate and so-called hybrid threats, such as terrorism, cyberthreats, piracy, or even environmental disasters. Doing so would imply a significant shift in the nature of the alliance, which to date has largely prepared itself to counter state-based threats. NATO would take a further step toward becoming a security *organization* rather than a traditional security *alliance*. Although these are not mutually exclusive concepts, they are different in character. The main challenge would be in achieving this transformation and ensuring the cooperation it requires on such issues as law enforcement and intelligence sharing. (See pp. 17–20.)

### **Global Alliance of Liberal Democracies**

Finally, the alliance might choose to go global, affirming its core values rather than its traditional regional identity, and extending offers of membership to liberal democracies around the

world. This direction is indeed radical but has been raised in a number of variations in the past decade. It is largely unrealistic, however, given not only the financial costs implied but also the fact that it is unclear who would actually want to join a global NATO in the first place. Hence, while the strategic concept will have to reflect a global vision that recognizes that NATO is part of a global security environment—a fact that entails developing more-effective relations with partners around the world—it should not strive to become a global alliance in the strict sense. (See pp. 21–24.)

## **What Combination of These Directions Is Best?**

### **Refocus on Europe, Focus on Nonstate Threats, and Focus on Fragile States**

One model would be to combine a refocus on Europe with a focus on fragile and failed states. This would respond to the current imperative of success in Afghanistan without neglecting European security. This model might be made more attractive by combining it with the non-state direction. The three together could allow an alliance that is flexible enough to meet future contingencies yet not vague or incoherent. (See p. 25.)

### **Refocus on Europe and Focus on the Greater Middle East**

Alternatively, the alliance might choose to focus on the Middle East and Europe and work to overcome the political obstacles to a new focus on the Middle East. This focus would have the benefit of geographical coherence and would serve the interests of nearly all the members while allowing continued focus on Afghanistan. (See p. 26.)

## **Moving Forward**

Other combinations are also possible and examined in Chapter Seven, but combining all the directions would deprive the strategic concept of coherence and is thus to be avoided. Unfortunately, the strategic concept that emerges may well attempt to do so. If this turns out to be the case, it will be essential to identify clear priorities, leaving some directions for the distant future while establishing others as critical missions for the next decade.

Revising the strategic concept will be a challenging process that will ultimately require a combination of creative, problem-focused leadership and skilled diplomatic deal-brokering among the allies. It is a challenge worth taking up, however, for the member states and for the broader transatlantic relationship.