POSITION PAPER
ON THE PROSPECTS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC VALUES AND COMMUNITY
IN THE LIGHT OF THE FORTHCOMING CHICAGO SUMMIT IN MAY 2012

Preserve the NATO tale: More than Interests, More than Values, More than Community

by

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Abstract: While recent initiatives of GenSec Anders Fogh Rasmussen and his team have brought about the highly demanded leadership action, they have done little to "sell" the Atlantic values more widely and regenerate the fabric of the transatlantic community. Steps are required within and beyond public diplomacy, and the forthcoming NATO summit in Chicago will have the opportunity to address some of the problems.

Throughout history, all alliances and coalitions have featured a normative dimension, whether stronger or weaker. The historically unique and ideologically ballasted East-West confrontation within which NATO was instrumentally incepted eventually pushed the North Atlantic Alliance right to the limit: to become not only a foedus with strong normative content but also a defender of western axiological system, a true political community without the element of sovereignty, the icon and guardian of the free world.

For over six decades now NATO has been much more than a value-based military alliance. Unlike today, when almost every preamble celebrates the values of Enlightenment as a cliché, in 1949 NATO stood up next to almost no one in defending these values. Before the praised Council of Europe got the chance to formally do so, Alliance leaders had already asserted the importance of a broader democratic community. Moreover, in December 1956, Lester Pearson, Gaetano Martino and Halvard Lange, three men of extraordinary vision, submitted their Report on non-military cooperation that sought to install a “sense of community“ that spreads across the Atlantic, thus irreversibly creating the true substance of the transatlantic link. Revealing economic, cultural, scientific, technical, information and personal ties between the “Old Continent” and the „New World“, the depth of this link is of such magnitude that it would likely remain in place even if NATO and the EU ceased to exist.

Faced by a monolith existential threat for 40 years (1949-1989), it was relatively easy for the Alliance to communicate its meta-values as well as cultivate what is sometimes termed as “natural alliance.” Unfortunately, with the fall of the iron curtain - which has been of enormous help in purely strategic terms - NATO was not able to sustain its ontological role and normative identity undisputed as well as its internal coherence unchallenged.

Roughly since before the adoption of its first post-Cold War strategy in December 1991, the Alliance has been living with the curse of searching for its new role and justifying its existence. Each Alliance strategic concept adopted as of 1991 has been thoroughly contemplated not only for the purpose of adapting the organization to the rapidly changing strategic environment and what Julian Lindley French has called „continuum of threats,“ but also as a prudent way of shaping NATO’s novel and legitimate role(s) in the 21st century.
Paradoxically enough, the new, global space for pursuing humanitarian interventions was of little help, and sometimes even detrimental to the support of NATO’s new crisis management role and its integral profile of a value-oriented actor. Apart from its “myopic” critics, impatient enemies, or simply, onlookers who have claimed “NATO disband!,” even its potential allies, and moreover, its partners, candidate countries, and new members occasionally prove to have been poorly immersed in NATO’s normative existence often holding a view of the Alliance as a security umbrella in a somewhat utilitarian fashion. On the other hand, instead of mitigating its eternal plight in addressing solidarity and burden-sharing problems, NATO has experienced a threatening level of political incoherence and capability gaps (most notably in 2003).

As a prudent measure for reasserting the normative narrative surrounding NATO’s indispensable role, for recovering the memory of the transatlantic meta-values that may have been partly lost in the labyrinths of post-Cold War dynamics, and creating a more coherent community among the Allies in the face of the global economic crisis that has threatened to impose distance between them, in the period preceding the adoption of the newest Alliance strategy (2010), Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and his team at the International Civilian Staff (until recently led by Jean François Bureau, now former assistant secretary general for public diplomacy) resolvedly launched an initiative for recasting the Alliance’s Cold-War image into a more inclusive, more transparent, more democratic, and youth-oriented community. As a result we have seen their enthusiastic Public Diplomacy Division (PDD), their vision of the cardinal role of new media in conveying the transatlantic narrative to transatlantic publics and “out-of-area” audiences, as well as their elevated awareness of the need for NATO to relate more closely to its democracies and heed the advice of younger generations from within the transatlantic space.

Nevertheless, while this initiative has brought about the pure and highly demanded leadership action, it has done little to “sell” the Atlantic values more widely and regenerate the fabric of the transatlantic community. Perhaps, one lacks sufficient temporal perspective to make judgments on current undertakings, but it is obvious that NATO could do better, including in the field of public diplomacy, to further its “values and community” strategy beyond the outspoken support for transparency, inclusion and online exchange.

NATO’s Public diplomacy Division (PDD) should help allocate more funds for scientific initiatives, academic events, and outreach activities in the transatlantic area and help mobilize more NATO civilian and military staff to attend such events. While, according to the author’s experience, NATO’s generous support for activities and events that help communicate Alliance’s role and values has stayed about the same, since the late 1990s, the number of visits by NATO personnel to important events has drastically decreased even in North America. The latter has helped develop the unsubstantiated argument for a recently sustained lethargy in Brussels.

There have been even bigger problems in spreading NATO’s genuine normative presence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The values upon which the Alliance rests, as well as the
discourse on their cultivation and wide exposure, are essentially part of an old, western narrative. While new NATO members and partners that once belonged to the former communist bloc have always possessed the element of cultural compatibility, it is still hard for them to see the Alliance the way a British, French, Canadian or American sees it, regardless of their acclamatory acceptance of liberal democracy as their sole constitutional future. This is not to suggest that Eastern Europe does not recognize or share the same values, but only to warn of actual distinction in the quality of such recognition and sharing: namely, new Alliance members and partners do not necessarily consider the legacy of Enlightenment as integral and indispensible to their view of NATO’s role and transformation. Moreover, instead of delivering the normative message forcefully, the considerable effect of the NATO-led interventions in the last 20 years has been that many individuals in South-Eastern Europe still see NATO as an intruder whose action conceals the material interests of certain members. Given the antagonistic bilateral constellations in which these countries still live, their officialdoms are rather interested in NATO as the guarantor of their national security and economic welfare (particularly investments) than NATO as an unprecedented, value-based community. While the first thought of the Poles, the Czechs, or the Romanians in this context is to make sure that the US extended deterrent covers them fully, including through hosting a ground-based (mobile) SM3 missile defence system, the major security concerns of the Balkan countries are local or narrowly regional. Hence, western public should not be deluded by poll scores showing 70%, 80%, 90%, or even stronger support for the Euro-Atlantic integrations in this part of the world. Such support is more of utilitarian than normative nature, and remains far from a global vision. Having this in mind, the Alliance would have sure benefited from developing stronger PR units and agendas for its missions and regional HQ in the Balkans. For the moment, NATO could develop initiatives and arrangements to relate more closely to the academic institutions and non-governmental sector in this part of Europe rather than rely merely on the limited role and resources of national NATO coordinators and their offices in the region’s ministries of defence/foreign affairs. In this context, establishing a separate Atlantic Fund for Eastern Europe aiming to support government and non-governmental initiatives, similar to "We Learn About EU" (ongoing in Macedonian schools), in which info centers are established and education campaigns run, would be a major step forward.

One fully understands that considerable financial implications underlie the potential role of PDD as outlined above, and budgetary concerns now seem more prominent that ever. But, if NATO wants to save its normative tale from disappearance, a conservative position such as the one extended by Karl Heinz Kamp (“You cannot relay the need to inform your public on NATO”) is unacceptable. Refuting the option of a more centralized public diplomacy and direct involvement of the NATO HQ with the issue of spreading the transatlantic word is of no help. NATO’s first official document to explicitly call for the establishment of appropriate information and PR structures within the Alliance’s institutional framework in order to deliver the transatlantic message and increase the overall exchange across the Atlantic was the 1956 Report
of the Three Wise Men. Ever since, phrases like “…progress in education and public understanding” or “In order to develop public awareness and understanding of NATO and the Atlantic Community, the Council should work out arrangements…” have contained more than concise recommendations for subsequent NATO leadership. Moreover, in recommending a prototype of NATO public diplomacy, the genius of Pearson, Martino and Lange, though focused on the priority that “NATO information activities should be directed primarily to public opinion in the NATO area,” could not possibly forget that “At the same time an understanding outside the NATO area of the objectives and accomplishments of the Organization is necessary if it is to be viewed sympathetically, and if its activities are not to be misinterpreted.”

In regards to building partnerships with actors from the Arab-Muslim world, and particularly in the light of the implications of the Arab Spring, NATO’s authorities should start contemplating what they “forgot” to impose during the last three waves of NATO expansion (1999, 2004, 2009): some mechanism of “soft” normative conditionality to be laid down by the respective partnership arrangements. This mechanism should be conceptualized as inducement rather than indoctrination. It should encourage future NATO partners to at least discuss NATO’s role and liberal democratic values in their academic and education systems if they are to receive more benefits within the partnership arrangement. Unlike the EU which has become a full (political, legal, economic and now strategic) circle, NATO has been handicapped to apply “hard” conditionality in the process of its eastward expansion. But, since NATO is not as “magnetic” as the EU and does not generate legally binding, supranational legislation - which is the easiest way to disseminate normative content - the Alliance authorities should seek for a tailored solution such as the one proposed here. This deserves to become one of the priorities of NATO’s enlargement and partnerships policy, particularly given the somewhat naive beliefs in democratic implications of the chain of (attempts towards) violent reforms in the Arab world.

More benign bilateral problems that are most likely to remain the fact of the anarchical structure of international politics should not prevent the Alliance from symmetrically encircling its expansion and strengthening the coherence of the expanded transatlantic community without leaving any “black holes” where it is totally unnecessary. Grand normative structures and designs are not supposed to stumble on minor hurdles, though it seems they always do. While the Atlantic community is now concentrating on the forthcoming Chicago Summit in May 2012, one small Balkan country is still legitimately hoping to see NATO leaders defeat the stereotype of “unjust” western schemes and “double standards” by giving it what it fully deserves: an invitation to become a full member of the Alliance. Indeed, the Macedonian – Greek dispute over the legitimate name of the Republic of Macedonia, though a painful precedent that continues the Macedonian plight, has neither been irrational (Macedonian position) nor a major cultural steal (Greek position). The dispute is fully rational as on both sides there are legitimate claims for distinct identity, grievances that arise from following different
perspectives on complex historical constellations and emotional historical narratives, and also, mutual fears related to the ever-present security dilemma. All these can be said irrational or unsubstantiated only if one knows the future. Since the latter cannot be the case, current calculations and predictions based on the past and underlying the dispute are fully sane. On the other hand, nobody steals one’s culture and past. The Balkans is a region of common culture and past in so many respects. Moreover, Macedonians as an evolving identity with a rigid ideational core have been there for centuries and it is quite ludicrous to argue the opposite only because they were or were not related to Ancient Macedonia, because they came or did not come along with the rest of the South Slavic tribes to their present settlement 13-4 centuries ago, because they developed or “invented” their national feelings in the late process of development of national consciousness in the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries. Though an evolving phenomenon, identity is a fact especially when vigorously exclaimed, and there is no force on the earth that could possibly change that. So far, the world has found no better definition of identities and minorities than the word of wisdom spoken out by the late Max van der Stoel, the famous Dutch politician and OSCE’s first high commissioner on national minorities: „Even though I may not have a definition of what constitutes a minority, I would dare to say that I know a minority when I see one.” In the light of this wisdom, the Macedonian-Greek dispute is one of those inherently unsolvable cases particularly as it goes far beyond the name issue: it implicitly contains a denial of ethnic identity and existence (very dangerous in this part of the world). Even if both sides frankly worked to catalyze the process of finding a compromise position (which has not been the case most of the time, though they would now virtually attempt to work something out in the months prior the Chicago summit), even if the UN mediator Mathew Nimitz, who has aged over this irritating problem, came up with a nearly perfect formula, there is always the likelihood of denying final and true acceptance of the agreed solution at least by one of the two sides (or parties thereof), referenda, non-recognition of certain parts or the whole of the deal by more radical groups, and, of course, residual, incurable grievances instilled in people over time.

This is not to suggest that finding a compromise is impossible in this case but only to point out that even a good compromise would hardly put an end to the story. Fortunately, in today’s mainly westernized Balkans there is little likelihood to see a scenario like the one Hans Morgenthau ultimately predicts for such “unsolvable” conflicts, when none of the arguing sides is ready to step back in favour of the other. But one never knows, particularly since the stalemate has already encouraged radical forces in the region to pursue their great-nationalist scenarios in the background and away from the eyes of constructive, mainstream politics. For these reasons, the Alliance should avoid entering into the vicious labyrinth of long-term identity politics, emotional histories and irritating perplexity which have altogether paradoxically stemmed from the simple continental European desire for implementing the exclusive (mono) ethnic (instead of civic) concept of nation and nationalism. The Alliance’s values and interests must not continue to be victimized by a minor problem compared to NATO’s global future. Therefore, though the name issue is likely to be considered on the margins of the Chicago
summit in May, for there are more imminent and bigger problems faced by the Alliance leadership, the North Atlantic Council should however attempt to build the necessary consensus in order to extend an invitation to Macedonia. Small nations might have been insignificant as opponents in some past times, but they have proved to be invaluable allies in an era of global governance. The decisive Macedonian reaction (“Scorpions,” from the First Mechanized Infantry Brigade of the Army of the Republic of Macedonia) of September 13, 2011, when the US embassy in Kabul was under furious attack by the Taliban, is to serve as reminder. And that’s not even nearly the best a small country could offer to the Atlantic community.

Finally, for the sake of the Atlantic community, NATO’s future institutional arrangements should represent no radical departure from the Atlantic tradition and the well-known consultation and consensus-seeking protocols. This is not to discourage NATO’s leadership to seek for more effective decision-making practices such as the eventual introduction of some version of the (qualified) majority principle, but to provide a hint that any such change would benefit the Alliance only if associated by additional mechanism for protection of national interests and dignity. Unlike the EU which is an evolving political union with more or less federalist prospects, the NATO alliance is most likely to remain an intergovernmental structure; however, should NATO decide to alter its courteous decision-making practice, a mechanism similar to the EU’s principle of constructive abstention might be useful.