# CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATIONS: NATO AFTER THE BUCHAREST SUMMIT

More than any previous NATO summit, the meeting in Bucharest has highlighted the dual challenge that the Alliance has been confronted with since the fundamental upheaval of the international system in 1989/1991: While its strategic self-perception is diminishing in sharpness due to diverging interests and external factors, the divergences between the threat perceptions and strategic cultures of individual member states are endangering the success of military operations undertaken by the Alliance as a whole.



*NATO summit in Bucharest, 3 April 2008*                    *Reuters/Kevin Lamarque*

The collapse of the bipolar order led to predictions of the demise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization due to the fundamental structural changes in the international system. During the past 18 years, the justification for NATO's existence has only been put into question twice: at the beginning of the 1990s, when the only remaining superpower briefly vacillated between a policy of continuing engagement and a retreat into isolation; and in the years immediately following 11 September 2001, when the administration in Washington, caught between military belligerency and existential fear and tired of cumbersome multilateralism, cast doubt on the principles of the post-war order, according to which the hegemon was prepared to integrate itself into international structures and subject its own power to strategic restraint.

On the whole, however, the Alliance – in the face of the geographical and functional expansion of the risk spectrum and driven by fears of its own failure – has undergone a remarkable adaptation process in recent years in an increasingly asymmetric conflict environment and has, precisely for this reason, proven its continuing relevance as a power to be reckoned with.

## Expansion of geographical and functional security dimensions

Since the 1990s, in addition to internal reform processes, the focus has been on the expansion of geographical and functional security dimensions. This has been without prejudice to the core purpose of the Alliance – collective defense, which continues to be a primary attraction in particular for Washington's new auxiliary forces in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe.

The various forms of the mostly individually tailored partnership policies, which have resulted in ten states having gained full membership since the end of the Cold War, represent one core pillar of the Alliance. The second consists of peace support operations. More than any other area, these operations encapsulate the expansion of the nature and scope of missions from classic territorial defense to international crisis management, from a territorial army to an intervention force.

This expansion also implies that peace support operations are no longer limited to the European periphery, as was the case until as recently as the 1990s; rather, as a direct consequence of the expansion of the concept of defense and of the political-strategic shift of focus towards the primary security policy challenges of the 21st century, they have taken on a global dimension. On the other hand, the goal is no longer simply the separation of exhausted parties to a conflict; the Alliance itself is becoming a party to conflict against the resistance of individual belligerents.

The structural changes in the international system have therefore contributed significantly to the enhanced role of the Alliance's missions. At the same time, the extinction of the Soviet threat that had held together the Alliance, and the concomitant expansion of the scope of action of individual member states, has
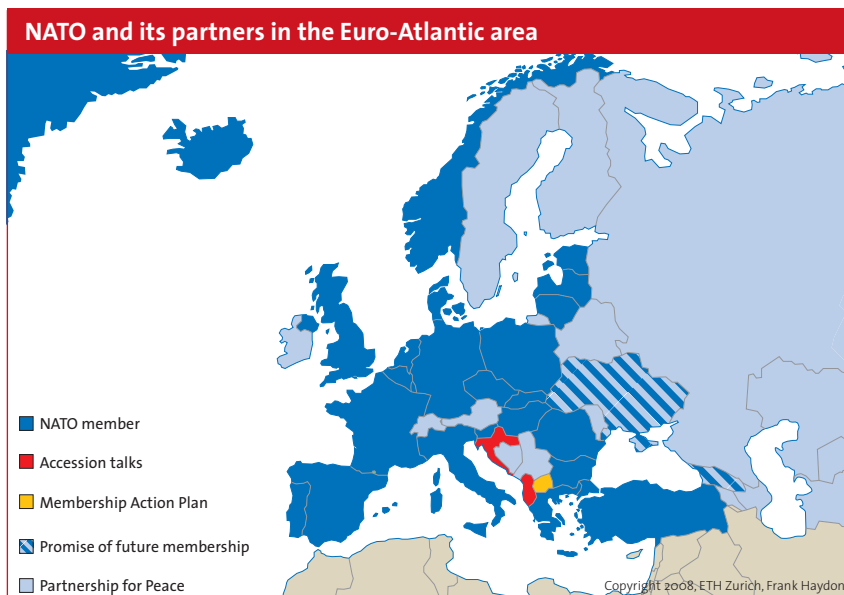
fundamentally altered the basis of the transatlantic relationship. The struggle between American hegemony and European self-assertion has led to a shift in the Alliance's center of gravity and to the introduction of a policy aimed at establishing an equilibrium of powers. The Bucharest summit has laid open the cracks in the Alliance's foundations – both in the context of the expansion debate and at the operative level.

## Enlargement – why and how far?

Since the late 1990s, the enlargement of NATO, which has largely paralleled the enlargement of the EU, has contributed decisively to the aim of an undivided and free Europe. In addition to the increase of security for the expanded Euro-Atlantic space, the goal has been to persuade candidate countries, none of which are military heavyweights, to embark on far-reaching political and military reforms, and at the same time to integrate them with the West.

Specifically, since the bloody Yugoslav wars of succession, the gradual involvement of the Western Balkan states has been an undisputed goal for many years. The decision taken in Bucharest to accept Croatia and Albania as members is an important step towards full integration of the region into Euro-Atlantic structures, which should be followed in the near future by acceptance of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (as soon as the dispute over its name is resolved). Furthermore, the Alliance is pursuing a policy of integration towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The quarrel over enlargement strategy witnessed at the summit in the Romanian capital was due not only to the US President's attempt to salvage his transatlantic legacy with a combination of recklessness and lack of diplomatic finesse, but also to three key questions that NATO, unlike the EU, has so far failed to address: Which members can the Alliance sustain? Which membership bids serve the purpose of European security? Where do the boundaries of the Alliance lie? Depending on the geographic and historic perspectives, on threat perceptions, and on the way that the Alliance is perceived by individual member states, these questions will be answered differently in Washington and Warsaw, in Berlin and Bucharest, in Paris and Prague.



**NATO and its partners in the Euro-Atlantic area**

- NATO member
- Accession talks
- Membership Action Plan
- Promise of future membership
- Partnership for Peace

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In order to uphold the US standing within the Alliance, and as a concession to the anti-Russian security reflex of the Eastern and Central Eastern European states, which owes more to history than to reality, the Western European members agreed in principle to NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine without a clear timetable, i.e., without integrating them into the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Nevertheless, the question remains as to what signal the Alliance is sending to candidate countries that have failed to resolve their territorial conflicts; or whose democratic development does not conform to the basic requirements as stipulated in the Washington Treaty; or where only 30 per cent of the population are in favor of NATO membership. The NATO enlargement study of 1995, despite its vague criteria for acceptance of new members, did specify certain reference points that were deliberately ignored in the discussions in Bucharest.

If there is a blurring of NATO's strategic self-conception in the Alliance's enlargement debate due to divergence of interests, this is particularly true for relations with Moscow. Irrespective of the existing cooperation structures, NATO's relationship with Moscow has largely remained symbolic. In this context, it is frequently overlooked that Russia's saber-rattling is due more to its domestic situation and imperial nostalgia than to a genuine perception of threat arising from NATO's expansion. Moscow knows that NATO is a guarantor of security at its western flank and that it benefits from the Alliance's engagement on its weak southern flank in Afghanistan. It is precisely for

this reason that Western Europeans are advocating a balancing act that aims to avoid further antagonism after the conflict over sovereignty for Kosovo, without giving the impression that Moscow can dictate NATO's agenda from outside. This is also the reason why it was possible to sign a transit agreement in Bucharest on the transport of non-military supplies for the ISAF mission through Russian territory. The extent to which NATO depends on external actors in Afghanistan, and to which the cohesion of the Alliance is contingent on the willingness to act on the part of its member states, became clear in the context of the summit's second focal point, the ISAF mission and the increasing military-operative strain on NATO.

## Burden-sharing and alliance solidarity

Like the previous NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, Bucharest was also a summit on Afghanistan. The "Strategic Vision" paper, accompanied by a NATO internal additional protocol, is an immediate reaction to the deteriorating security environment. Three aspects are given particular attention: A comprehensive approach to security; a long-term commitment to provide support for Afghanistan, linked to an appeal for more Alliance solidarity; and the definition of benchmarks required to be met before troops can be withdrawn.
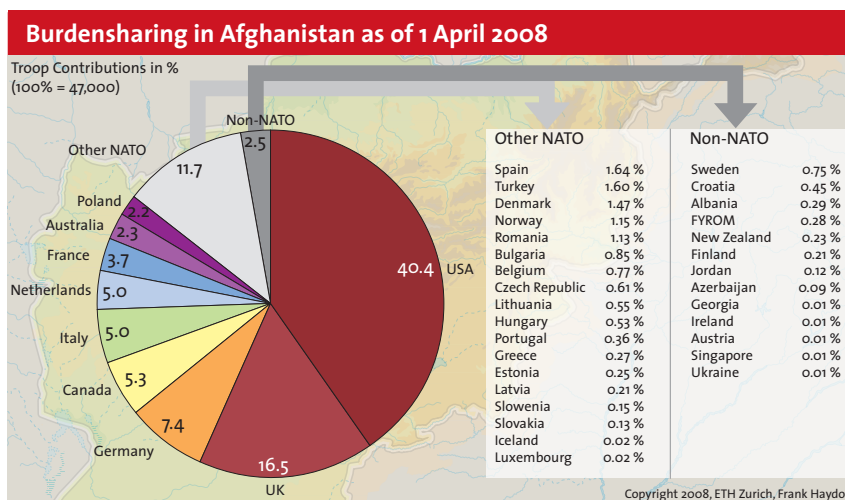
In recognition of the fact that military capabilities alone are insufficient to achieve a sustainable degree of stability, the final declaration focuses specifically on a holistic approach to security. On the

one hand, it aims at linking civil-military instruments; on the other hand, it calls for structured cooperation with other international organizations, partner states, and non-governmental organizations. However, it is not only the importance of NATO within such cooperation that is a matter of controversy; further differences remain over the relative priority of civilian and military instruments, due to the noticeable discrepancy between the costs of civil reconstruction and those of warfighting.

The basic problem – differences in threat perceptions based on different situation assessments and strategic cultures – remains unresolved. It is all the more remarkable that the Alliance has not only managed to take on long-term military obligations, but also to commit itself to burden-sharing, to close gaps in terms of troops and capabilities, and to aim for maximum flexibility in military missions. Alliance solidarity has been particularly strained in recent years by national caveats, shortcomings in adapting to the mission doctrine, heterogeneous distribution of burdens, and – compared to other peacekeeping missions – the relatively low numbers of troop deployments (which have, however, increased visibly to around 47,000 in the past 18 months), giving rise to remarks about a two-tier alliance of members comprising of those that fight and those that do not. This is unlikely to change noticeably in the wake of the deployment of an additional French battalion to the east of Afghanistan – linked to the expected return of France to the integrated military structure – which will allow the US to relieve the Canadian forces in the south of the country.

However, the readjustment of the Afghan mission also involves an incremental plan for withdrawal in the future. Among the key military and civilian benchmarks is the gradual transfer of responsibility to Afghan security forces as an outcome of an accelerated training process. As early as in August 2008, Afghan troops are to take on responsibility for Kabul and its environment; by 2010, it is anticipated that the country will have 80,000 trained soldiers and 82,000 police officers; and by 2011, the Afghan army is to take over control of the south of the country on its own.

The interaction between regional instability, misguided domestic developments



**Burdensharing in Afghanistan as of 1 April 2008**

Troop Contributions in %
(100% = 47,000)

| Other NATO | |
|---|---|
| Spain | 1.64 % |
| Turkey | 1.60 % |
| Denmark | 1.47 % |
| Norway | 1.15 % |
| Romania | 1.13 % |
| Bulgaria | 0.85 % |
| Belgium | 0.77 % |
| Czech Republic | 0.61 % |
| Lithuania | 0.55 % |
| Hungary | 0.53 % |
| Portugal | 0.36 % |
| Greece | 0.27 % |
| Estonia | 0.25 % |
| Latvia | 0.21 % |
| Slowenia | 0.15 % |
| Slovakia | 0.13 % |
| Iceland | 0.02 % |
| Luxembourg | 0.02 % |

| Non-NATO | |
|---|---|
| Sweden | 0.75 % |
| Croatia | 0.45 % |
| Albania | 0.29 % |
| FYROM | 0.28 % |
| New Zealand | 0.23 % |
| Finland | 0.21 % |
| Jordan | 0.12 % |
| Azerbaijan | 0.09 % |
| Georgia | 0.01 % |
| Ireland | 0.01 % |
| Austria | 0.01 % |
| Singapore | 0.01 % |
| Ukraine | 0.01 % |

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(as manifest in the lack of measures to combat the opium trade), and global terrorism is not given sufficient attention in either the "Strategic Vision" paper or the incremental security plan. The experience in Afghanistan will cause NATO to weigh future out-of-area deployments in highly complex conflict environments more carefully – certainly at the risk of jeopardizing either its influence or its existence.

## More questions than answers

The 60-year anniversary summit of the Alliance in 2009 in the border area of Kehl and Strasbourg between France and Germany, with its focus on "NATO-EU", will not only be an opportunity to highlight the importance of the Alliance for European security, but also provide a chance for member states to move at least some of many open questions onto the agenda:

NATO requires a new Strategic Concept to replace the one of April 1999 that will take into account the fundamental changes in the security policy environment. The task of elaborating a new Strategic Concept would not only engage the new administration in Washington from day one, but would also force all member states to replace the formulaic compromises of previous years with clear commitments to the Alliance's self-perception, strategy, and operative implementation, including the issue of fair cost-sharing, and to resist the temptation to make it a dumping-ground for nearly all security policy challenges, irrespective of the evident limits of its capabilities.

Furthermore, the various partnership concepts require a comprehensive redefinition. This applies to the NATO-

Russia Council, which is suffering from increasing tensions; to the Partnership for Peace with its extremely heterogeneous composition of members; to the halting Mediterranean Dialog; and to the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which has to date largely been a failure. Deliberations on bringing together the various partnership programs under one roof with a single geographic, functional, and organizational pillar have not been taken beyond a rudimentary stage. Finally, it will be highly significant to see what NATO can offer countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan, which are increasingly participating directly or indirectly in the Alliance's missions and seeking for institutional linkup without actual membership. In the long term, it is hardly conceivable to accept offers from these states without simultaneously integrating them more closely into a structured process.