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Un nuevo concepto estratégico
para la OTAN

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A new strategic concept for NATO

Abstract:

In recent decades, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has issued a new strategic concept every ten years approximately. After that time since the last one (issued in 2010), it is time to ask whether geopolitical conditions in Europe and in the world have changed enough to require a new strategic guide. It seems to suggest it the need to apply a new policy of containment with a more assertive Russia and that makes more than a few European countries feel threatened, as well as defining the relationship with China, exponent of the new actors, state and non-state ones, who demand a place to play a prominent role on the world stage. There is also the need to confront black swans that, although not of a purely military nature, could affect the resilience of our societies and therefore their defence capacity.

Keywords:

NATO, strategic concept, summit, Russia, China, European Union, deterrence

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Un nuevo concepto estratégico para la OTAN

Resumen:

En las últimas décadas la Organización para el Tratado del Atlántico Norte (OTAN) ha producido un nuevo concepto estratégico cada diez años aproximadamente. Trascurrido ese tiempo desde el último (emitido en 2010), es hora de preguntarse si las condiciones geopolíticas en Europa y en el mundo, han cambiado lo suficiente como para requerir una nueva guía estratégica. Así parece sugerirlo la necesidad de aplicar una nueva política de contención con Rusia, así como definir la relación con China, exponente de los nuevos actores, estatales y no estatales, que reclaman un sitio y desempeñar un destacado papel en el escenario mundial. Sería también necesario poder enfrentarse a aquellos cisnes negros, que aun no siendo de carácter puramente militar, pueden afectar a la resiliencia de nuestras sociedades y por lo tanto a su capacidad de defensa. El presente análisis pretende sopesar los problemas que dicha elaboración podría suponer, frente a los inconvenientes de no hacerlo.

Palabras clave:

OTAN, concepto estratégico, cumbre, Rusia, China, Unión Europea, contención

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Introduction

In the hierarchy established in NATO documents, the Strategic Concept is precisely the first and most important, just below the very Washington Treaty of 1949, which offers it a unique and differentiated status from all the others. Its importance lies in the fact that it serves as a high-level guide for the Organization's overall action, guiding its actions in the diplomatic, political, geostrategic and operational fields.

Since the signing of this treaty, seven strategic concepts have been approved, but especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, one has been issued approximately every 10 years (1991, 1999 and 2010), in an effort to adapt to the tectonic changes that the world scenario has been imposing. It could be deduced that the inability to produce one that would adapt to a period where fluctuating geopolitical changes forge new geostrategic scenarios, would demonstrate the impossibility of the Organization to advance with the needs of the moment.

Some, however, think that a "strategic action" is more important than a strategic concept, as current NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg¹ has said. This is surprising, especially from someone who has to guide the actions of an international organisation of the size, means and scope of the Atlantic Alliance. It would be tantamount to saying that planning is fine, but that action is more important, which seems a contradiction in terms.

The reason for such an astonishing statement could be found in the reluctance to embark on a risky venture, as there is a widespread fear that, due to the current political and strategic conditions in certain Member States, the difficulties in adopting a new strategic concept are such that it could even undermine the cohesion of the Alliance, instead of strengthening it². And this is so, because the positions that some NATO members hold in conflict zones such as Syria and Libya, or the way of understanding the relationship with Russia, far from being coincidental, in some cases are totally opposite.

¹ Statement by NATO Secretary General at the "NATO talk around Brandenburg Tor" conference, 12 November 2018, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_160241.htm, accessed on 25 June 2020.

² Jeffrey H. Michaels "Some considerations for NATO's eighth Strategic Concept", NDC Policy Brief, NATO Defence College, January 2020.

Thus, we find that some allies, in certain geographical scenarios turn out to be adversaries (see the case of France and Greece vs Turkey in the Western Mediterranean). This obviously undermines the cohesion of the Alliance and presupposes that the development of a new strategic concept may prove to be a futile effort, the process of which adds further cracks to those already in place. This could be the background to Secretary-General Stoltenberg's evasive response.

To avoid embarking on such a stormy sea, the pseudo-method of progressive adaptations, contained in the political declarations and communiqués emanating from NATO Council summits, is preferred. They are attended by the Heads of State and Government of the Member States, and therefore receive the maximum political support as guides for the actions of the Alliance. These communications, together with the identification of threats and challenges, establish the measures and initiatives that the set of partners must follow and implement, whether they are of a political, strategic, economic, purely military or even social nature (we cannot forget that the concept of resilience includes society as a whole as an object of interest, in order to guarantee an adequate response from its armed forces). In this sense, the communiqués issued after the summits in Wales, Warsaw, Brussels and London are those that have marked the most important changes that the Atlantic organisation has made in its interpretation of the new threats, in the reorganisation of its forces (with the creation of new naval and land commands), and in the creation of initiatives aimed at purely military deterrence in recent years.

However, all these measures are merely responsive and perhaps what the Alliance needs is a new strategic guide which, in addition to bringing together everything contained in the aforementioned communiqués, in some way provides it with a forward-looking approach that will enable it to anticipate events. This seems to be the view of French President Emmanuel Macron, who accused NATO of being brain-dead³. Indeed, the London Declaration⁴ (December 2019) invited the Secretary General to initiate a "process of reflection" aimed at "strengthening the political dimension of NATO, including the method of consultation".

³ Statement by President Macron to *The Economist* magazine, available at <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>, accessed on 25 June 2020.

⁴ Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm, accessed on 25 June 2020

This does not mean that we will enjoy a new strategic concept in the coming months. If anything has characterised NATO, it has precisely been the slowness in producing this kind of framework document (the concept approved in 1967 was discussed since 1960, due to the French refusal to accept a change in the nuclear strategy, which the Americans intended to change from the initial “mass response” to the “flexible response” and its approval was only possible after France’s abandonment of the military structure). Another example of the aforementioned slowness can be seen after the attacks of “September 11” (2001), after which it was necessary to wait 8 years to see a new version approved in 2010, despite the fact that the then Secretary General (Jaap de Hoop Scheffer) publicly announced that he wanted a new strategic concept for 2009, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the Alliance, which proved impossible.

Reasons that make it difficult to draw up a new strategy

There are several reasons why it is difficult to draw up and approve a new strategic concept. We have already mentioned the difficulty of reaching a consensus among the already 30 allies that make up the Organization, and the risk of new cracks in the process.

No less important would be the risk to the reputation of the Alliance if due to lack of consensus it were impossible to successfully conclude it, without agreeing on the sought-after strategy. However, this possibility could be very limited, because it would always be possible to reach a minimum agreement, which would make it possible to save its reputation, although at the cost of obtaining a document of little use.

On the other hand, there is the fundamental question of whether NATO should be a global actor, as Washington and London seem to want, or reduce its scope to the Euro-Atlantic environment, as Paris and to some extent Berlin defend. We should not forget that among the group of small allies there are also those who reduce their interest to the proximity of their borders, due to their limited vision of global affairs.

There is also the different perception that each Member State has of the potential threats and the priority that each should receive, largely depending on its geographical situation, which determines different geostrategic environments.

The procedure for developing the strategic concept would also be important. Will it be carried out by a small group of experts selected from within the Organization's bureaucracy or with input from a large group of think-tanks from Alliance countries? Will they be from academia, diplomacy, the military or a representation of all of them? Will draft comments be sent to nations as progress is made or will it be a completed draft? Will comments from nations be binding or non-binding? ... There are a whole series of questions that affect not only the what, but also the how, and depending on which method and format is chosen, the product will be one or the other. This will have an impact on the capacity for consensus that the final product may receive, which will increase or decrease its importance as a reference document.

Perhaps not so important, but also relevant is the question of the replacement of the Secretary General, which is due to take place in September 2022. If the current Secretary wished to start the process of defining a new strategic concept, this could not begin before the conclusions of the current study were approved at the next summit, which would leave less than two years for the completion of the entire process, which includes approval by the 30 allies. As we have seen, it might not be enough to complete it in time, as it would require analysis in the capitals, discussion and approval at the 2022 summit, so it might leave the task half done before the next one. His replacement would be in a more comfortable situation in terms of time available to finish the job, as long as he is not ordered to do so to coincide with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of NATO's creation in 2024, which would reduce his time frame.

All these difficulties mean that the appetite for developing a new strategic concept is substantially reduced.

Thus, despite the fact that important geopolitical changes have occurred after 2010 (the Arab Spring, the destabilisation of Libya, the quagmire in Afghanistan, the conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the advent of China, the conflict in Syria, the emergence of ISIS, the progressive destabilisation of the Sahel, etc.), which have contributed to drastically changing the geostrategic landscape around Europe, NATO continues to follow the same strategic guidance that preceded it. Even so, the Alliance has drastically modified some of its approaches contained in that strategy, using the summits it holds as a catalyst, as we know.

Russia and the new strategy of containment

The conflict in Ukraine in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, led to the decision by NATO at the Warsaw summit in 2016 to launch the so-called Deterrence Initiative, whereby 4,500 troops, divided into four battle groups, have been deployed in the three Baltic States and Poland. The message to the Kremlin left no doubt as to the Alliance's determination to ensure the security of its most exposed allies in the face of possible armed aggression by Russia.

The Copernican change in the relationship between NATO and Russia has resumed the line taken by the Atlantic organization after the abandonment of the military structure by France (chaired by Charles de Gaulle) in 1966. Following this abandonment, the Belgian foreign minister, Pierre Harmel, conducted a series of consultations among the allies, which forged a so-called "Harmel Report"⁵ in 1967 proposing that relations with the then Soviet Union should be conducted along two basic lines: a strong military deterrent which, while avoiding provocation and escalation, would leave the door open for dialogue and détente.

Thus, in what some analysts define as a new containment strategy, NATO has emphasised its military profile in order to increase its deterrent capacity (increase in military exercises, defence spending, renewal of material and equipment of units, increase in the US presence on European soil, advanced military deployments, etc.) relegating dialogue with Moscow to a secondary plane, although still possible when the situation so advises. Thus, meetings of the NATO-Russia Council are very rare and instead of dealing with the most immediate problems in a cooperative spirit, they serve as a stage for airing mutual accusations.

But there are allied countries that believe that détente should be sought, led by France and Germany. The first because it considers that Russia is one of the major international geostrategic players, and must therefore be counted on. The second is because a substantial part of its economy depends on Russian supplies of oil, gas and rare earths, in addition to its traditional policy of détente towards the East, already since the Cold War. But facing the group captained by France and Germany are those who dissent from that vision, mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland and the

⁵ Information available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67927.htm, accessed on 25 June 2020.

three Baltic countries, along with others who remain in the background but do not wish to gain Washington's animus. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to the US capital in December 2019 opened up the possibility of a certain thaw, which did not produce great results.

In any case, NATO should be cautious in seeking a new détente with Russia, because the latter could understand it with an acceptance of the policy imposed by the force of the facts, which could be counterproductive. But surely there are areas of common interest where cooperation would benefit all (disarmament, jihadist terrorism, international crime, cyber security, climate change, aerospace technology, energy security, stability in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, the Arctic, etc.). All this would require a strategic guide that would direct and unite the efforts of the allies, avoiding dispersion and/or divergence of efforts.

Against China, but alongside it

At the aforementioned London summit, it was unanimously recognised that China represents both opportunities and challenges. The Asian giant is not a particularly active military actor in the European geographical environment, although it has already participated in joint naval exercises with Russia in the Baltic and the Eastern Mediterranean. As its economic interests increase in the countries bordering the Mediterranean, its naval presence could cease to be anecdotal. In fact, it has already conducted major evacuation operations of Chinese workers in Libya (where it evacuated more than 35,000) and in Yemen (600 Chinese subjects and some 200 foreigners), demonstrating a relative naval operational capacity in scenarios far from the metropolis. In addition, China is taking control of important port infrastructures in Europe⁶, which together with its mastery of 5G technology and all that this entails, would place it in a privileged position of control that could favour an increase in its penetration of the Euro-Atlantic area. All this will require increased attention from NATO and coordinated action.

China is also increasingly an international actor to be reckoned with, but despite its contribution to regional stability in areas of conflict and instability (such as its fight against piracy in the Indian Ocean or its contributions in Africa through military

⁶ Information available at <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/european-ports-a-key-plank-of-chinas-belt-and-road/>, accessed on 25 June 2020.

deployments, funding of the African Union or development aid⁷) it is far from being an Asian partner with which NATO can easily develop lines of cooperation, as is the case with Japan, South Korea or even India⁸. It is clear that Washington has a global dispute with Beijing, which extends to practically all spheres in the political, economic, diplomatic, cultural and of course military fields. But most European allies do not necessarily see it that way, since the European Union considers China a “*strategic partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival*”⁹. And we cannot forget that 22 members of the EU are also members of NATO, which necessarily forces the latter to maintain an ambivalent position with regard to the Asian giant.

In any case, the Alliance would need to consider the possibility of trying to clearly define its relationship with China in a way that would be mutually beneficial to both actors (permanent and structured dialogue to facilitate cooperation in areas of instability or conflict, in maintaining access to the so-called “global commons”, in agreements on disarmament, the fight against terrorism and organised crime, etc.), which requires a broad consensus. A fundamental objective in defining such a relationship would be to avoid a deepening of Beijing’s alignment with Moscow, or to reduce it.

Against the black swans

The outbreak of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic has shown that black swans can be more disruptive than might be expected, because of the speed, extent and severity of their consequences. Rarely has the need for international cooperation to help nations hit by the unexpected become so apparent, and within it the need for civil-military cooperation¹⁰. Today it was a virus that is spread at incredible speed, but tomorrow it could be a series of tsunamis, a large meteorite, virulent solar activity or a super volcano. It is necessary to define and structure mechanisms for cooperation and mutual assistance, which make it possible to take advantage of all available capacities, both civilian and military.

⁷ Information available at <https://mq.co.za/article/2018-10-24-chinas-expanding-military-footprint-in-africa/>, accessed on 25 June 2020.

⁸ Information available at <https://thediomat.com/2019/08/no-india-isnt-a-major-non-nato-ally-of-the-united-states/>, accessed on 25 June 2020.

⁹ EU Joint Declaration of 12 March 2019, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>, accessed on 25 June 2020.

¹⁰ GUNGIL HOOGENSEN, Gjørvi; Coronavirus, Invisible Threats and Preparing for Resilience; NATO Review, 20 May 2020; available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/index.html>

Of course, all this is intimately related to the resilience of societies within nations, for which NATO would need the indispensable cooperation, if not direct leadership, of the European Union. We are not talking about mutual recognition, which both organisations profess and transcribe in their joint documents and statements. We are referring to the creation of permanent cooperation bodies that are capable of creating the synergy that the aforementioned crises require, which requires a deepening and extension of the current levels of cooperation, which in certain fields (such as the exchange of classified documentation or intelligence) leave much to be desired.

If we think that the credibility of the Alliance (both internally and externally) also depends on the usefulness it demonstrates in situations of this type, this facet would be worthy of being contemplated in a future strategic guide.

Conclusions

The process of defining a new strategic concept runs the risk of airing differences in depth between the allies (priority attention to the Russian threat as opposed to that required by the growing instability in the Sahel) and on the Alliance's general purpose (global actor or one focused fundamentally on the defence and security of the Euro-Atlantic area).

The current state of the relationship with an international actor as important as Russia requires a clear definition of it, on which all allies agree, or are in some way driven to agree. This relationship, in addition to showing a very solid deterrent, reaffirming the will and capacity for defence, should instrumentalise the channels and bridges that facilitate détente and cooperation in matters of mutual interest. All this, without it being an acceptance of a Russian policy of faits accomplis.

The relationship with China also requires a definition that leaves no room for contradictory interpretations and allows the advantages to be exploited and the challenges to be faced, offering a common front that avoids the fragmented and asymmetric response that has been taking place until now.

In turn, the creation of a cooperation structure that would make it possible to take advantage of the capabilities of the whole for the benefit of all in the event of non-military crises, together with the deepening and instrumentalization of cooperation with the European Union, the essential partner, would require its documentation at the highest level.

Whatever the risks involved in defining a new strategy, delaying the implementation of the process for defining and approving it could risk undermining the credibility and cohesion of the Alliance as divergent interest groups take shape among the Allies. Some of them are even openly confronted in certain geographical scenarios, which are also close to Europe. These difficulties could be alleviated in part by the consensus that a new strategic guide would forge and whose discussion process, in itself, could contribute to improving mutual understanding, as suggested by the conclusions addressed by the Reflection Group nominated by the Secretary General of the Alliance¹¹.

In 2024, the 75th anniversary of NATO's creation will be celebrated. Four years should be enough time for the company to successfully define and approve a new strategic concept. Despite the difficulties involved in this process, perhaps the time is right to show that the Alliance, far from being brain-dead, is facing the future with renewed determination, cohesion and anticipation.

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¹¹ NATO 2030: *United for a New Era, Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, November the 25th 2020; available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_files2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf , last time visited on December the 5th, 2020.