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Contents



Cover: Pakistani tribal people, displaced by the
military offensive in South Waziristan, await
relief supplies. Courtesy of AP Photo/Alexandre
Meneghini.

3 Foreword

Af-Pak

- 4 On the Verge: Pakistan's Insecurity
Owen Bennett Jones
- 10 Pakistan's Anti-Taliban Counter-
Insurgency
Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi
- 20 India's Af-Pak Strategy
Shashank Joshi
- 30 A Note from the Field: The Growing
Media Landscape in Afghanistan
Dominic Medley

Strategy Past and Present

- 36 Strategy Before the Word: Ancient
Wisdom for the Modern World
Beatrice Heuser
- 44 Reclaiming the Art of British
Strategic Thinking
**Paul Newton, Paul Colley and
Andrew Sharpe**

NATO and Russia

- 52 Creating the Next Generation of
NATO Partnerships
**Stephan Frühling and
Benjamin Schreer**
- 58 Russian Military Reform: Prospects
and Problems
Bettina Renz

National and International Security

- 64 New Intelligence Blunders?
John Hughes-Wilson
- 72 Complex Threats: The Globalisation
of Domestic and Foreign Security
Kristian Gustafson
- 80 Getting Down to Business:
Industry's Role in National Security
Hugo Rosemont

Military History

- 86 Douglas Haig and Veterans
John Kiszely

Reviews

- 94 By **Brian Burridge, Ian Raitt, Brian
Holden Reid, Andrew Roberts** and
more

CREATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF NATO PARTNERSHIPS

STEPHAN FRÜHLING AND BENJAMIN SCHREER

NATO has a panoply of legacy partnership programmes, which should be reviewed as part of the development of a new Strategic Concept. Stephan Frühling and Benjamin Schreer argue that NATO should conceive of its partnerships in terms of the provision of public security goods, and base its activities on a more explicit consideration of the Alliance's strategic interests. In combination, both aspects can achieve consensus about goals and means, provide greater coherence, and better communicate NATO's activities and intentions.

NATO has begun deliberations on a new Strategic Concept to help build consensus on the future purpose and strategy of the Alliance. One major issue in this process will be for the Allies to agree on how to make better sense and use of NATO's wide array of formal and informal partnerships. Former NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, has called for the new strategic concept to establish a 'next generation' of partnerships.¹ The need for readjustments in this area is widely recognised both inside and outside the Atlantic Alliance. But the problem defies easy solutions: Allies are at odds about NATO's future role² and thus also disagree on the scope and limits of its various partnership formats. This will make agreement within the Alliance on a new approach to partnerships a difficult task, notwithstanding the need to set priorities in this area.

How, then, can the Alliance bring about the 'next generation' of partnerships? This article argues that NATO could marry the need to develop fresh conceptual thinking with the requirement to balance members' different interests. Two approaches stand out in particular: first, the Alliance should frame partnerships in terms of providing public security goods in order to increase internal and external understanding of the purpose, scope and limits of the Alliance's

programmes. Second, NATO should prioritise partnership goals according to a clearer definition of its regional strategic interests. Together, both steps can help to inform conceptual thinking within the Alliance on its partnership programmes.

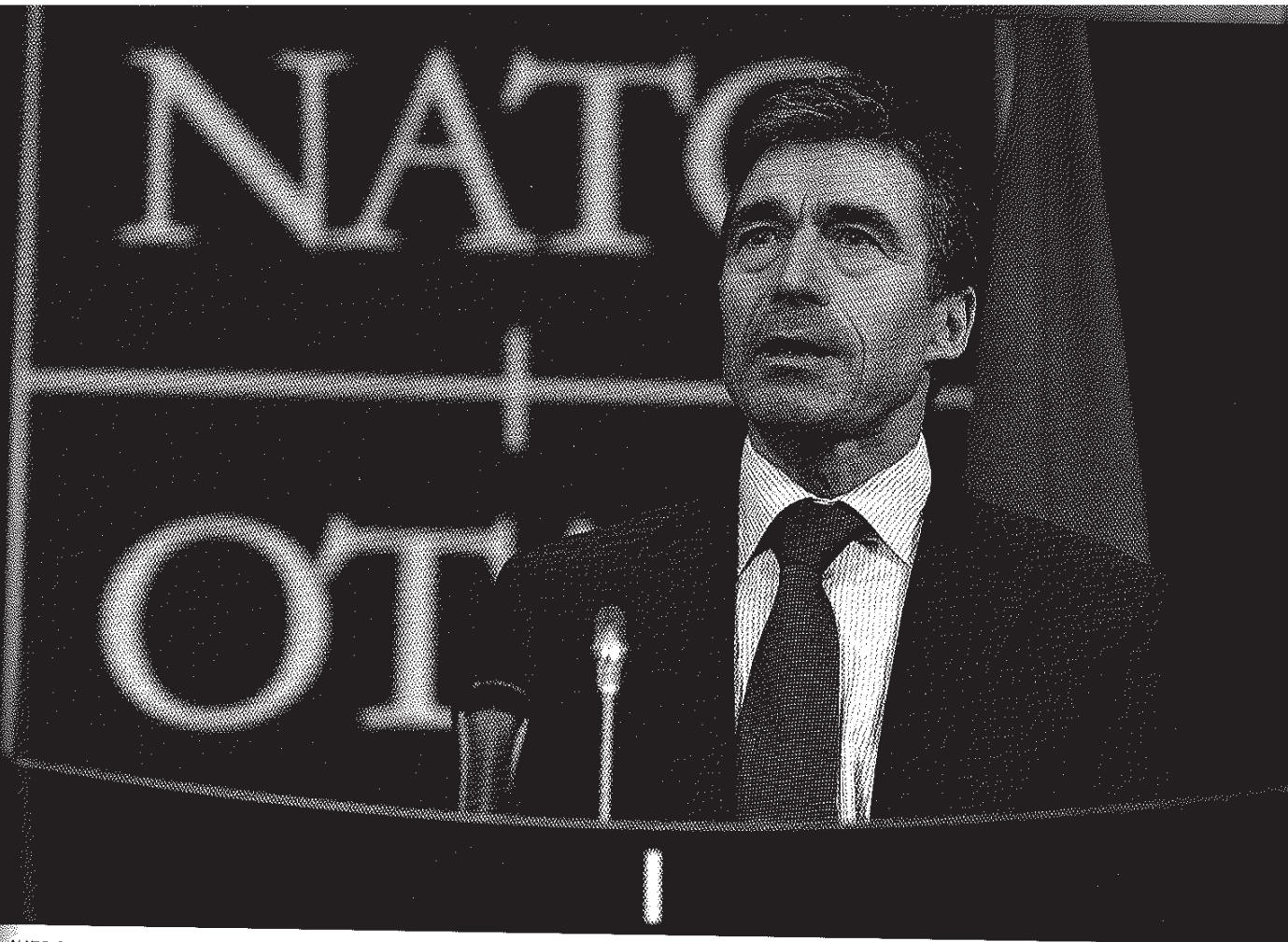
NATO's Sprawling Partnership Programmes

NATO has a wide range of partnership formats and a long history of working together with non-member countries. During the Cold War, the Alliance co-operated in selected areas with countries as far away as Australia. The demise of the Soviet Union increased the need to reach out to new partners. Of immediate importance was the establishment of co-operative relationships with Central and Eastern European countries to help build a new European security architecture. The establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in December 1991 brought together allies and, initially, nine Central and Eastern European countries to consult on issues of common security concern. While the NACC focused primarily on establishing a multilateral security dialogue, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, launched in 1994, paved the way for practical co-operation between NATO and countries in the Euro-Atlantic region. In 1997, the NACC was replaced by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) which today consists of

the twenty-eight NATO members and twenty-two partner countries, and which also provides the political framework for the PfP programme.

During the 1990s, NATO also established a partnership programme for countries in the Mediterranean region. On the initiative of Italy and Spain, the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) was launched in 1994. Egypt, Israel, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia became the first partners in this forum; Jordan and Algeria followed in 1995 and 2000. At the political level, the MD focuses on bilateral meetings to exchange views regarding regional security, although the forum also includes multilateral events. The practical dimension includes co-operation in areas such as civil emergency planning and military training.

As a third major programme, NATO initiated the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in June 2004 to reach out to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Six GCC countries were invited, and to date four of these – Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates – have joined, while Saudi Arabia and Oman have declared their interest in ICI. The emphasis of ICI is on practical co-operation in the security field, such as tailored advice on defence reform, military-to-military co-operation, and common activities in the fight against terrorism.



NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. *Photo courtesy of NATO.*

Finally, as NATO's operational reach extended far beyond European territory to include missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Alliance sought to establish mechanisms that would allow for co-operation with 'partners across the globe'. This included Asia-Pacific states such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, and Latin American nations like Argentina and Colombia. On a case-by-case basis, these countries determine the extent of their interaction with NATO. Many also contribute to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Hence, in addition to NATO's bilateral formats with Russia (NATO-Russia Council), Ukraine (NATO-Ukraine Commission) and Georgia (NATO-Georgia Commission), the Alliance now has a wide range of partnership instruments at its disposal. In fact, a growing number of legacy programmes now co-exist side-by-side, as NATO has created new formats for different regions and purposes every few years.

The Need for a New Approach

However, as NATO's partnerships change over time and strategic issues rise and fall

on the international agenda, the current system of idiosyncratic partnerships struggles to adapt.

The EAPC now consists of a highly diverse mix of fifty countries. Many former partners from Central and Eastern Europe have become NATO member countries. EAPC partners now include Western European countries like Sweden and Switzerland, which choose to remain outside NATO although they fulfil all criteria for membership; a few remaining members-in-waiting, like Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; a rather assertive Russia; and various countries in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. But highly capable force providers like Sweden and Finland prefer to deal with NATO on a bilateral basis, and have a political relationship with NATO in many ways more akin to 'global partner' Australia than to other EAPC countries. Eager to gain access to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), Georgia and Ukraine have focused their energy on the NATO-Georgia Commission and the NATO-Ukraine Commission respectively. Since the Alliance lacks a strategy towards Central Asia, the EAPC also

cannot provide a coherent template for developing relationships with countries in that region. As a result, the format has great difficulties defining a common agenda, let alone common interests or objectives.³

Lack of conceptual clarity also afflicts the MD.⁴ Since the programme is not intended to address the animosities between Israel and the Arab members, its objective of strengthening multilateral security co-operation faces significant limitations. It is noteworthy in this context that the US Department of Defense handles its relations with Israel through its European Command, rather than through Central Command, to avoid the problems that hamper NATO's MD. In terms of its capabilities and relationship with NATO members, Israel too has more overlap with partners like Australia than with other members of the MD.

Then there is the issue of NATO's relationships with 'partners across the globe', an awkward phrase that highlights the difficulties facing the Allies in agreeing the purpose of its global reach. In 2006, Anglo-Saxon allies had lobbied for the establishment of an institutionalised 'global partnership forum' with like-

mind countries, such as Australia and Japan. Couched as a push to give NATO a global ordering function,⁵ this approach had no prospect of consensus within the Alliance. Allies remain split on whether the relationships with 'partners across the globe' should primarily be burden-sharing exercises for operations such as in Afghanistan, or whether NATO should use them to 'shape new security dynamics in important regions'.⁶

The lack of political consensus on the scope and limits of many of its partnerships has led NATO to adopt a 'customer approach': NATO largely leaves it up to its partners to define their desired areas of co-operation.⁷ This approach, however, cannot substitute for a clear sense of purpose and strategy on the part of NATO, nor can it provide a conceptual template for an alliance that operates in an era of globalised security challenges. Instead, it is a one-way street through which NATO is drawn into far-flung regions, without an internal consensus on what it wants to achieve there, or how to achieve it.

Japan, for example, is primarily interested in discussions at the political-strategic level with the North Atlantic Council in order to debate issues of major interest to its own security, such as the North Korean ballistic missile programme, or China's military build-up. However, NATO has no clear response to such approaches, as this would require agreement on what role, if any, the Alliance wants to play in the Asia-Pacific region. In a similar vein, the ICI programme is providing training and advice to small Gulf countries in a tough neighbourhood increasingly dominated by Iran. But in the absence of a NATO strategy for the Middle East, there is little scope for meeting partners' expectations of further political or military support. The question therefore remains as to what, exactly, the Alliance is trying to achieve in the Gulf.

Finally, NATO's concept of partnerships must adapt to the rise of emerging powers and new regional security organisations. Russia, China, India and Pakistan fall into a category of countries which are of increasing relevance to Euro-Atlantic security and require a form of institutionalised

dialogue, but which do not necessarily share NATO's goals or are interested only in military co-operation. The Alliance needs to base partnerships with these players on a 'realpolitik' approach which is not primarily based on the objective of shaping their behaviour and policies. The establishment of the NATO-Russia Council, outside the EACP, is an indirect acknowledgement of this problem. This challenge will be even more acute should NATO engage countries such as China or India, which have no tradition of participating in Euro-Atlantic fora such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Further, emerging regional security organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), made up of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, are difficult partners but too important for NATO to ignore.

Alliance Divided

The new strategic concept needs to find ways to address the conceptual and policy limbo affecting its partnerships. Unfortunately, the issue of partnerships is only one of a whole set of strategic questions on which the Atlantic Alliance struggles to reach consensus. The new strategic concept will need to broker a compromise between those member countries that advocate a multi-functional NATO with a global reach, and those who see its primary role in the North Atlantic area, or even want to confine it to the traditional task of collective defence.⁸ It is far from certain that the new strategic concept will be able to solve these longstanding disagreements, and more likely that compromise formulations will be found that may narrow the differences, but still allow for very different interpretations.

The new strategic concept must thus develop a framework for NATO partnerships that is couched in terms conducive to overall consensus. Proposals to leverage partnerships into a 'Global NATO' or an 'alliance of democracies' will remain non-starters, both within NATO, and among many of the partner countries

themselves.⁹ Particularly after the Afghan operation, many European Allies will probably be even more reluctant to deploy large numbers of NATO forces in theatres around the world. That said, the new framework will have to take into account that NATO is now committed to a number of operations and activities beyond the narrow Atlantic area, despite the fact that collective defence remains the Alliance's most important function.

NATO must find more clarity and purpose for its partnership activities. It must develop an approach that explains why the Alliance engages in partnerships, what its goals are for the partnerships, and what practical activities would best be suited to achieving these goals. In order to do so, it needs to establish a level of agreement on regional priorities for the Atlantic Alliance, as well as broad outlines of regional engagement strategies. At the centre of a new framework for partnerships, however, there must be a clearer conception of what the policy instrument of NATO 'partnerships' entails in functional terms. As argued below, its effect is best understood as the provision of a 'public security good'.

Step One: NATO as a Provider of Global Public Goods

A 'public good' is a good that can be consumed by everyone without diminishing its availability to others, and from whose consumption no one can be excluded – a lighthouse being the classic example. In terms of regional and global security, peaceful international relations, freedom of the seas, or the absence of lawless safe havens for criminals and terrorists are examples of public goods, whose benefits extend to all members of the international community. Other authors have already referred to NATO as a 'public regional organisation', providing security as a public good.¹⁰ In this context, 'public goods' provides a terminology and concept that could be acceptable to all Allies, as it emphasises the global role of NATO while avoiding ambitious goals or confrontational imagery.

How can this concept be used in the context of NATO's partnership programmes? Why would this approach be more advantageous for the Alliance than the current one? In addressing

these two crucial questions, it is essential to consider the core strength of the organisation's partnership programmes. Unlike any other multilateral security institution, NATO's partnerships offer a combination of practical defence assistance and co-operation, with a wider security dialogue. In doing so, NATO provides a range of different types of public goods directly, while the partnerships themselves can help the Alliance in doing so, and therefore also create public goods. The concept of a public good thus helps to clarify the *functional* aspect of NATO's partnerships along the following lines:

Military-Technical Public Goods

NATO expends considerable resources in defining common technical standards, which are codified in Standardisation Agreements (STANAGS). Most of these agreements can be copied and adopted by countries around the globe. The practical importance of NATO's STANAGS for the interoperability of military forces worldwide should not be underestimated. In turn, non-member Australia has co-operated with the Alliance for decades in developing standards in, for example, munitions safety and handling.

Security Sector Reform Public Goods

NATO provides bilateral and multilateral training and capacity-building. Partners in the PfP programme benefit significantly from this aspect of NATO's co-operation in the area of security sector reform, as do other partners whose 'tailored co-operation packages' draw from the range of activities provided by the PfP programme. At the same time, however, solidified civilian control over the military increases regional stability to the benefit of the whole international community, as does the increased capacity of partner countries to contribute to international peacekeeping operations.

Operational Planning Public Goods

NATO provides operational and planning capabilities to enable other countries and organisations to perform peacekeeping missions in circumstances that would otherwise be beyond their capability. This has, for example, been crucial to

the African Union's (AU) operation in Darfur and the initial ISAF operation in Afghanistan. Again, the benefits of NATO's support to countries and organisations that are willing to undertake such missions flow to the international community at large.

Collective Security Public Goods

Bilateral and multilateral NATO partnerships can serve as confidence-building measures through practical co-operation and dialogue. They contribute to collective regional security and reduce the risk of conflict for the whole international community. In the multilateral part of the MD, for example, NATO provides the political (and logistical) context within which partner country dialogue can proceed.

The concept of 'public goods' thus captures most of NATO's practical partnerships activities. Conceptualising the partnership formats along these lines has a number of advantages. The first, and perhaps most important, is internal. Today, NATO lacks a consensus about what it aims to achieve in many partnerships, but the established organisation of partnership programmes also inhibits discussion about goals and purposes. Identifying specific 'public goods' that the Alliance wants to provide through particular programmes, in their particular geographic context, could provide greater clarity to the internal debate. It could acknowledge NATO's global security function, and the resulting need to establish a network of partners. At the same time, the concept's main characteristics of non-rivalry in consumption and non-excludability¹¹ embed the partnerships in a benign shaping of the security environment, and provide a more explicit way of defining the limits of the Alliance's engagement.

Externally, the concept of public goods reinforces the non-threatening and non-exclusive character of the Alliance's engagement. It helps to increase understanding about NATO's role and intentions with other regional players, as it provides clarity to existing as well as potential partners about the Alliance's level of ambition, and the scope and limits of co-operation. Rather than be drawn into an ill-defined framework

of political and military co-operation, other countries would be able to engage with NATO on terms that leave much less room for uncertainty about the Alliance's intentions.

Step Two: Basing Partnerships on NATO's Strategic Interests

NATO partnership programmes have opportunity costs in political, managerial and financial terms, and they are prominent activities that are important for the perception of the Alliance at home and abroad. While thinking in terms of 'public goods' provides a clearer rationale for the way that NATO partnerships can increase Alliance and international security, it does not provide a basis for setting priorities among competing interests and programmes. What NATO tries to achieve with its partnerships, and in what regions it tries to do so, must ultimately be derived from a description of the Alliance's strategic interests that can find agreement among the Allies.

The very notion of partnerships implies that the Allies' strategic interests go beyond territorial defence of the Euro-Atlantic region. For the purposes of long-term planning and policy development, strategic interests are best understood as those factors in the international system that reduce the likelihood of a direct threat to the Alliance developing, or factors that would reduce the severity of any such threat.¹²

The first and foremost condition that reduces the likelihood and severity of any threat to the Alliance, and hence its first and foremost strategic interest, is its collective capability and willingness to deter and defeat an armed attack against any member country. This is the bedrock of the Alliance, and is rooted in the combination of values and geostrategic situation that is shared by its members.

Hence, there will remain a need for intensified dialogues and Membership Action Plans to assist non-member countries on their path to eventual membership. Moreover, a number of countries such as Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland that co-operate closely with the Alliance nevertheless refrain from formal membership for a variety of historical and political reasons. Still, the particularly strong political and

strategic commonality between NATO and the European 'neutrals' warrants a dedicated partnership programme. It should comprise the full gamut of functional partnership activities, with a special focus on political dialogue on questions of common security, on increased interoperability and even eventual integration.¹³

The second enduring strategic interest shared by all Allies is the maintenance of co-operation and peaceful conflict resolution between the major powers, rooted in a stable global balance and robust deterrence relationships. Co-operative great power relations do not mean that war and conflict could not touch Alliance territory or population, but the severity of any such conflict would remain of a much lesser scope than what was feared during the Cold War. In particular, the importance of Russia is thus recognised by NATO through the NATO-Russia Council, and NATO should remain open to creating similar channels with China and India, given their growing strategic potential.

In addition, the Alliance's European periphery now consists of six countries whose defining strategic characteristic is their geographic location between NATO and Russia: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Whatever the political palatability of the terms 'buffer states', 'zones of influence' or 'near abroad', they seem to describe reasonably well the particular problems that will condition NATO's relations with these countries for the foreseeable future. Given the delicacy of their strategic situation, there will remain value in a two-track relationship comprising a multilateral forum, including Russia, and bilateral relations between the Alliance and its eastern neighbours. In both channels, close political consultation and exchange should be complemented by confidence-building measures and assistance in security sector reform to maintain influence with military and political elites.

Third, NATO has an enduring strategic interest in the stability of its southern flank in the Mediterranean, and its south-eastern flank in the Middle East. This requires a balance of power within the region that contains and

constrains any power that is hostile to the Alliance, and might otherwise become a direct threat. Also, it requires internal stability to contain and control extremist organisations that could link up with sympathising elements in member countries themselves.

There are thus sound strategic reasons for maintaining partnership programmes with the countries now members of the MD and ICI. In the case of the MD, the main threat lies in internal instability of partner countries, as well as in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. NATO should seek to provide confidence-building measures and assistance in security sector reform which may, in the future, include a role in supporting a newly established Palestinian state. Because of the geographical proximity of NATO and partner countries in the Mediterranean, broad political dialogue will be helpful in its own right to prevent and manage issues of tension that might otherwise spill over into Alliance territory.

In contrast, NATO's 'natural' points of contact with countries in ICI are more limited, but of growing importance with the increasing likelihood of a nuclear-armed Iran. The Alliance will have a strong interest in the self-defence capability of its partner countries, in order to enable them to maintain a viable regional balance. This suggests a continuing emphasis on practical training and capability-building activities in areas of Alliance expertise, such as logistics, civil defence, nuclear, chemical and biological countermeasures, or missile defence. NATO's Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I) should be folded into the ICI framework and expanded to other countries in the region. Upgraded and institutionalised exchanges between ICI members and the NATO Council could frame capacity-building efforts in the future, but a decision on whether NATO will seek to provide collective security public goods in the Gulf will be of great consequence for the Alliance, and should be clearly communicated to its partners.

Fourth, the Alliance has an interest in a global political system that collectively minimises armed conflict. Outside the European continent and the Middle East, however, NATO's stake in conflict is

usually going to be limited, and in a post-Afghanistan era, direct intervention will be even more the exception rather than the rule. Thinking of partnerships in terms of providing public goods, however, provides immediate points of common interest and practical co-operation with other regional organisations with a similar purpose. In future, NATO should build on the example of operational planning support to the AU's mission in Darfur, and extend practical assistance by providing military-technical public goods to increase intra-regional interoperability (for example, in the form of adapted STANAGS) and multinational capacity-building to other organisations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS).

The Way Ahead

NATO's new strategic concept should make explicit reference to the concept of 'public goods' as the basic function of its partnerships. This will make it possible to offer new purpose to the Alliance's political dialogue with partner countries, and provide a clearer practical focus for their engagement with NATO. The benign nature of 'public goods' will also make it easier for NATO internally to review its partnership programmes with explicit reference to the Alliance's own strategic interests.

At the practical level, strategic interests as defined in this article suggest a number of adjustments to NATO's partnership activities. First, NATO should provide for more formal and intense co-operation focused on the 'Alliance's allies' in Europe. It may well be that such co-operation could be achieved in the context of deeper links between the EU and NATO.¹⁴ If such closer integration cannot yet be achieved, a new partnership programme for the non-NATO EU member countries should substitute for it in the short term, and could facilitate it in the longer term.

Second, maintaining contacts with Russia will be important whether it proves a true 'partner' or not, and the NATO-Russia Council should primarily be thought of as a channel of communication that may be complemented – but not defined – by practical co-operation. NATO should also remain open to developing bilateral exchanges with other countries

in its eastern periphery that would parallel a multilateral forum including Russia. For reasons of institutional inertia, that forum will probably remain the EAPC, and NATO should work in the long term to making the management of common security issues west of the Urals the focus of that programme. NATO's partnership with the 'stans' of Central Asia derives from twentieth-century historical accident, and while the operations in Afghanistan have given NATO's relations with these countries a temporary lease of life, there is little in that region that would make it intrinsically any more important to NATO than, for example, the Caribbean, West Africa, or the Horn of Africa.

Third, both MD and ICI in their current form are roughly in line with NATO's enduring strategic interests. While the former should comprise political dialogue, confidence-building measures and security sector reform, the latter should focus on capacity-building and training. More explicit articulation of the Alliance's goals and objectives in the form of 'public goods' to be achieved for each programme would help set limits to engagement, provide focus, and manage expectations among Alliance members as well as partner countries.

Fourth, very similar benefits would be derived from re-focusing NATO's global partnership activities towards regional security organisations. It is difficult to see where either political momentum or strategic rationale would come from to sustain Alliance-wide support for an enhanced political and practical engagement with individual countries as 'partners across the globe'. This is not to deny that the Alliance can benefit from their participation in NATO operations, as in Afghanistan, or that there are specific and focused areas of mutually beneficial practical co-operation, as in Australia's longstanding interest in munitions safety, and possibly with Japan in missile defence. However, NATO in this context is not seeking to provide public goods in regions as far as East Asia, but looking for contributions to its own activities. Co-operation is thus either temporary and contingent on particular operations, or very specific in technical niche areas. Moreover, very similar contributions could be made by countries as far as Japan and Australia, or as close as Sweden or Israel. Therefore, NATO should look for ways to organise such exchange without a broad, formalised, highly visible, and politically loaded 'partnership' terminology.

Conceptualising NATO's partnerships as instruments to provide 'public goods' acknowledges that NATO has become a multi-faceted provider of security outside the Alliance area itself. At the same time, reference to the Alliance's own strategic interest better defines and limits that role, and thus gives confidence to Allies, partners and third countries alike about NATO's intentions and purpose in its partnership activities. That itself would be a valuable public good. ■

Dr Stephan Frühling is a lecturer in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and Managing Editor of Security Challenges. His primary areas of research and publication include Australian defence planning, strategic theory, ballistic missile defence and nuclear strategy.

Dr Benjamin Schreer is the Deputy Director of the Aspen Institute Germany in Berlin. His primary interests of research and publication include NATO, German defence policy, strategic theory and Australian defence policy.

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