

## NATO's New Strategic Concept: What is at Stake for Estonia?

November 2008

**Maria Mälksoo**

### I Introduction

The recent war in Georgia reinvigorated Estonia's traditional security concerns as Russia's behaviour was taken to be a blunt proof to the collapse of the dream of an emerging post-modern security system in Europe where states reject the use of force for resolving disputes and do not consider invading each other.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Estonia's concerns regarding the sufficiency of NATO's political deterrent and the solidity of its collective defence guarantee in case of a more traditional kind of confrontation in the Baltic region have considerably intensified. For the Alliance as a whole, the conflict between Russia and Georgia has amplified the difficult dilemmas that NATO has been struggling with throughout its post-Cold War existence. If anything, Russia's apparent resurgence as a geopolitical competitor to NATO in Europe has made the Alliance's attempts to reconcile its post-9/11 profile of fighting global contingencies (i.e. trans-national terrorism) at their source with its traditional profile of collective defence even more complicated. Whilst 9/11 provided a wake-up call on the increasing prominence of asymmetrical non-state security risks, 8/8/8 in turn signifies for NATO the urgent need to re-think its traditional security predicament along with addressing the host of other issues related to its out-of-area crisis management operations. What is crystal clear by now is that Russia has never really bought NATO's declared transformation from a strictly politico-military alliance to an extended democratic security community with its new missions in the post-Cold War world. Apparently, it tends to still interpret the Alliance's eastern enlargement and partnership networks as an essentially anti-Russian geopolitical competition game in the traditional fringes of Western-Russian rivalry for dominance. NATO's challenge is therefore to re-conceptualise and reassert its strategy of deterrence without proving the Russian rhetoric of confrontation right.

This paper sketches the main concerns of Estonia in the context of the revival of a possibility of a traditional geopolitical confrontation at NATO's eastern fringes, and delineates its respective interests vis-à-vis the new strategic concept of NATO. The process of opening the existing strategic concept for consultations among the member states is hoped to be launched at NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit in April 2009. According to NATO's Secretary General **Jaap de Hoop Scheffer**, the new strategic concept of the Alliance should "*lay out why NATO is unique; how it is transforming; and how it will tackle the core security challenges before us.*"<sup>2</sup> Importantly for Estonia's (as well as the rest of the Baltic states') domestic grievances about the firmness of the collective defence clause in case of a more traditional kind of regional conflict,

<sup>1</sup> On modern and post-modern security systems, see Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Atlantic Books, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, *NATO Review*, April 2008, p. 6.

the Secretary General has particularly emphasised the need of NATO's new strategic concept to *"strengthen our common purpose, and...[to] ensure that NATO remains understood by our publics, and relevant to their security needs"* (ibid.).

It is indeed important that NATO as an alliance would not diverge too much from what the allies are actually doing and emphasising in their strategic documents and public discussions at the national level. Currently, national strategies do not always really fit with NATO's overall visions – and this is a remarkable source of strategic confusion, vulnerability as well as of wasting anyway scarce resources. A key rationale for compiling a new strategic concept for NATO would therefore be to increase its internal legitimacy and political relevance for the home audiences of the allies.

A mere 'branding strategy' for re-adjusting NATO to the changed strategic environment would therefore clearly not suffice. Strong rhetoric on the solidity of collective defence should be synchronised with the actual daily practice of the Alliance that has, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, been seriously tilted towards out of area operations. It is thus critically important to back up political promises with actual practices – respective collective defence planning activities and collective exercises,<sup>3</sup> as well as to pay considerate attention towards maximising the 'double-utilisation' of the Alliance's capabilities for its two core missions (i.e. collective defence of its member states' territories along with crisis management operations outside of the immediate Euro-Atlantic area). This would, in and of itself, give new substance to NATO's traditional deterrent role.

## II Re-thinking collective defence

Estonia's greatest concern in relation to NATO's new strategic concept lies in the possibility that the meaning of 'collective defence' in case of the strategic confrontation with Russia remains unspecified and thus politically hollow. Albeit all strategic documents of the Alliance since the end of the Cold War have emphasised the continuing centrality of 'common defence', NATO has restrained itself from providing traditional military 'backing' to this clause in the new eastern member states in fear of antagonising Russia.

NATO's *Comprehensive Political Guidance* of 2006 maintains that *'collective defence will remain the core purpose of the Alliance'*. Yet, it also hastens to add that *'the character of potential Article 5 challenges is continuing to evolve'* (§ 5). Quite clearly, the notion of 'collective defence' has had slightly different connotations in 1949 when NATO was established; after the end of the Cold War in the context of the Western euphoria over the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact; after 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States; and today, in 2008, in the context of the re-emergence of NATO's traditional security agenda in parallel to its global stabilisation missions.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note here that the Alliance's last significant collective defence exercise took place only in 2002 – and there has not been any other since that date.

The notion of collective defence was conceptually enlarged after 9/11 so that traditionally understood state-led direct aggression towards a member state of the Alliance was not anymore its immediate synonym. Yet, whilst before the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008, the intellectual bone of contention in the debates over NATO's new strategic vision focussed on the meaning of the expanded notion of 'collective defence', it is rather the re-iteration of the 'traditional' content of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty that is currently being called for in the Baltic states and Poland. Before Russia's demonstration of power in Georgia, NATO debated the re-conceptualisation of Article 5 in the new strategic concept in terms of its potential enlargement in order to address new security challenges (i.e. cyber and energy contingencies) along with the more traditional ones. Today, in light of Russia's recent action in Georgia and the fact that the Alliance does not actually have collective military presence of any significance in the new Eastern European members of NATO, the need to rethink the nature of NATO's deterrence policy against a more traditional kind of security contingency in the eastern fringes of the Alliance, and to redesign NATO's military deterrent and retool its operational kit accordingly, has re-emerged with compelling urgency.

For Estonia, the question of the day is thus: ***how to acknowledge within the scope of 'Article 5 threats to the Alliance' the unfortunate return of traditional regional security concerns (with respective implications for strategic contingency planning in the Baltic region) without openly antagonising Russia?*** How to reconcile the 'enlarged' understanding of Article 5 with the fact that, against most of the predictions of the 1990s, *Realpolitik* with its potential for hot regional crises has returned with vigour in NATO's partner country of Russia? Estonian public opinion remains concerned whether Russia's recent aggressive self-affirmation vis-à-vis Georgia has actually managed to get across to all of the NATO allies their post-Cold War erring against the major principle of any strategic planning: the need to be conscious about the human tendency to evaluate and predict one's opponent's behaviour according to one's own standards. NATO redesigned itself after the end of the Cold War, expecting a re-invention of a similar kind from Russia as the legal and political successor of the Soviet Union as well. This expectation has not been sufficiently reciprocated, to say the least, as the recent events in Georgia have sadly illuminated. For NATO, yet again, the need to reinvent itself and strike a new balance between a defensive regional alliance and a global intervention force has been underscored by the Russian-Georgian war.

States like Estonia are therefore pondering whether the understanding that has informed NATO's post-Cold War transformation according to which the Alliance's territorial integrity and its members' political sovereignty is not anymore existentially threatened is still valid in the context where Russia seems to be continuously testing the Western organisations' political integrity and credibility. Whilst it is unlikely that Russia's attempts to restore its former hegemony in Eastern Europe would take militarily as openly aggressive forms as they have in Georgia, the recent strategic developments nevertheless point to the legitimacy of the Baltic states' suspicions about disregarding the continuing significance of the traditional understanding

of 'collective defence' in the eastern flank of the Alliance. Even if it is unlikely that Russia would aim at an open attack or direct military and political takeover against the Baltic states, the signs of its attempts to disturb the effective functioning of the respective state apparatuses by destabilising the Baltic societies have nevertheless been clearly visible throughout the 1990s till today (e.g., the meddling with the 'Bronze Soldier'-affair in Estonia and the overall 'ethnic engineering' attempts of the Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia). If anything, this trend has intensified in the course of the last few years.

Estonia's concerns therefore call for re-emphasising the possibility of regional crises and conflicts at the borders (or in the border regions) of the Alliance in the new strategic concept of NATO. The war in Georgia, reminiscent of Russia's traditional great power politics for its non-hesitance to use military power in order to secure its geopolitical interests, has further fed Estonians' distress about the possible erosion of NATO's principle of 'indivisibility of security' and the 'sense of equal security' among the members of the Alliance - that have been evoked in the official documents of NATO since 1991, including the current strategic concept of 1999 – in case of the Alliance's direct confrontation with Russia in the Baltic region. Sustaining the core importance of Article 5 as NATO's grounding principle and strategic backbone, along with collective and transparent NATO defence planning system, would consequently be in accordance with Estonia's natural self-preservation instincts.

Estonia's anxieties could be somewhat alleviated if the following clauses of the NATO's existing Strategic Concept of 1999 would retain their political centrality, and their rhetorical prominence would be further matched with a bolstered military content:

- *Deterrence and Defence: To defer and defend against any threat of aggression against any NATO member state as provided for in Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty (§ 10).*
- *The primary role of Alliance military forces is to protect peace and to guarantee the territorial integrity, political independence and security of member states. /--/ NATO forces must maintain the ability to provide for collective defence while conducting effective non-Article 5 crisis response operations (§ 47).*
- *Solidarity and cohesion within the Alliance, through daily cooperation in both the political and military spheres, ensure that no single Ally is forced to rely upon its own national efforts alone in dealing with basic security challenges (§ 8) (emphasis added).*

Against the worry of the emergence of a possible stratification within the Alliance, or the development of circles of states in the Alliance with different degrees of security, the principles of allied solidarity and strategic unity should remain paramount for all NATO missions (cf. § 41 of the Strategic Concept of 1999).

### III Re-thinking deterrence

NATO's current strategic concept lists deterrence and defence '*against any threat of aggression against any NATO member state as provided in Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty*' among its fundamental security tasks. Yet, with the emergence of trans-national terrorist networks as the most significant threat to NATO since 9/11, the nature of deterrence has 'evolved' along with the challenges of the Article 5 kind. Whilst deterrence as a general strategy is aimed at persuading an adversary not to take action that it might otherwise have done, terrorists are difficult to deter in the way states could – particularly if death is not regarded as unacceptable loss and thus an ultimate threat that should be avoided at all costs, but rather welcomed as an end in itself by suicide terrorists.<sup>4</sup>

NATO's new strategic concept should thus clarify what the Allies regard as the soundest concept of deterrence in the changed strategic circumstances. From Estonia's viewpoint, it should further address the question of ***how to supplement NATO's general deterrence strategy against its new and old challengers with more specific, tailor-made deterrents for the Baltic security purposes?*** Deterrence, after all, only works if the threat of military retaliation is credible, and if the putative aggressor has no doubts about the political intention of its opponent to use it. As the standards of credibility for the potential contesters of NATO's deterrent naturally vary between state and non-state actors, a deterrent strategy could be formulated at different levels of generality, ranging from systemic to more specifically designed.<sup>5</sup>

At the broadest end of the spectrum, NATO's goal should be, as ever, to make deterrence apply system-wide, in the hope that the allied capabilities and the general reputation of the Alliance will be sufficient to deter any actor in the international system from taking any unwanted action, without necessarily making any explicit deterrent threats. Besides general systemic deterrence intended to prevent all possible challenges to the Alliance, NATO should further specify its deterrent message by delineating the specific types of action it most seeks to prevent. This declaratory strategy of situation-specific deterrence avoids the 'overkill' risk of individually tailored deterrence that could easily become preoccupied with the need to craft a different message for each individual actor and thus confuse the clarity of the overall deterrent signal of the Alliance. Similarly, situation-specific deterrence strategy triumphs over the all-too-general systemic deterrence, which relies on a vague threat of potentially devastating consequences for any unwanted action vis-à-vis the Alliance. The situation-specific deterrence of NATO would detail more precisely the red lines that should not be crossed against its member states, as well as spell out explicitly the consequences to be expected by the contestants of these red lines.<sup>6</sup> By presenting NATO's strategic message against a particular type of behaviour rather than

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Christopher Daase and Oliver Kessler, "Knowns and Unknowns in the "War on Terror": Uncertainty and the Political Construction of Danger," *Security Dialogue* vol. 38, no. 4 (2007), p. 421.

<sup>5</sup> See Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Wrestling with Deterrence: Bush Administration Strategy After 9/11," *Contemporary Security Policy* vol. 29, no. 2, 2008, pp. 229-65 for further discussion on different types of deterrence.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 255.

against any concrete actor, the Alliance would manage to avoid the reefs of succumbing to the rhetorical and political confrontation with Russia that the latter has recently sought to engage it in.

In practical terms, NATO's general, system-wide deterrence effect could be sustained by the continuing presence of the United States' nuclear forces in Europe. Whilst the Alliance's deterrence posture has historically been defensive rather than punishing, it nevertheless derives from the actual war-fighting capability, force preparation and military doctrine of the Allied strategic forces. Yet, as the deterrence value of nuclear weapons depends on the perceived willingness of the allies by the challengers of this deterrent to actually deliver the promise of destroying whole societies through nuclear counter-strikes, the moral legitimacy of the threat of nuclear retaliation becomes very questionable indeed, and could thus hardly serve as the sole basis for NATO's deterrence strategy in today's global security environment. It is thus important to emphasise that the aim of NATO's nuclear deterrent is ultimately political: to guarantee peace, to avoid military conflicts, and to deter the Alliance's conventionally armed or nuclear weapons-empowered potential antagonists.

NATO's 'minimal declaratory deterrent' tailored for the Baltic purposes as delineated in its new strategic concept could be guaranteed by:

- (i) sustaining a fair balance in the new strategic concept's wording of the Alliance's new global missions and its more traditional tasks towards the defence of its member states so that neither would overshadow the other;
- (ii) acknowledging in the new strategic concept the recent problematic developments in the Euro-Atlantic security environment besides the global trends of international terrorism and the proliferation of the WMD (i.e. attempts of 'some states' to influence their neighbours' political choices at home and abroad by military, economic, energy, and other means);
- (iii) taking clear notice of Russia and its internal and external political developments as essential factors shaping the Alliance's security environment;
- (iv) drawing an explicit structural and rhetorical distinction between NATO's different partnerships (i.e. Russia and Ukraine that are currently tackled under the same heading of 'Partnership, Cooperation, and Dialogue') as well as specifying the political and institutional directions towards which NATO wishes to take its existing partnership relations.

#### IV The solidity of the transatlantic link

Estonia is anxious about the possibility that the strategic disagreements between the allies over the necessity of some mission far away from the allied territory (e.g. Iraq) could politically 'travel' to the solidity of NATO's collective defence clause, turning the obligation of collective defence to yet another 'coalition of the willing'-type of compromise. The centrality of the transatlantic link by which *'the security of North America is permanently tied to the security of Europe'* (§ 7) thus remains of critical importance for Estonia also in the new strategic concept of the Alliance. As Estonia is afraid of the possibility of NATO's diminishing importance as *'an essential transatlantic forum for Allied consultations on any issues that affect their vital interests'* (§ 10), its worst imaginable scenario would be if the US would begin approaching NATO as merely an optional device for grouping its allies, rather than as the core basis of its own security.

For its fear of the possible weakening of the transatlantic link, and thus the *de facto* divisibility of the security of Europe and that of North America, Estonia would be all for emphasising in the new strategic vision of NATO that the Alliance should remain *"the essential forum for consultation among the Allies and the forum for agreement on policies bearing on the security and defence commitments of its members under the Washington Treaty"* (§ 25). Relatedly, the description of the EU-NATO cooperation in the new strategic concept of the Alliance (just as the very cooperation itself) should be taken to a much more advanced level of specification than is currently the case as well.

#### V Conclusion

It is in Estonia's interest that the allies would reach a sustainable minimal agreement on a common threat perception in NATO's 'traditional' security front, as well as on where to go with that perception, or what to do with it. From Estonia's standpoint, a new strategic concept of NATO should, first and foremost, provide an answer to these core questions. The prediction that has guided NATO's post-Cold War self-reinvention – that there is only a very low probability of conflict between the established nuclear powers in the Euro-Atlantic area – has not turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, but a fallacy. What is really needed, then, is a common analysis and agreement on a response to the re-emerged regional security dilemmas for the Alliance. That inevitably implies a further clarification of NATO-Russia strategic relationship and the future basis of NATO's enlargement policy: whether to continue with an openly value-based course, or to rethink the enlargement's strategic incentives in order to include some states that might not be fully applicable in terms of their democratic credentials as of yet, but that could considerably buttress the territorial defence of today's NATO.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> As suggested by Ronald Asmus, "NATO's Hour," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2008.