

Nato: Expanding or Exploding?

Gabriel Kolko

Gabriel Kolko is the foremost historian of warfare. His latest book, The Age of War: The United States Confronts the World (Lynne Rienner Publishers), is now available.

Washington finally realizes after its chronic troop shortage in Iraq and elsewhere that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's vision of quickly 'shocking and awing' enemies to win victories has been spectacularly unsuccessful, and that the United States needs foreign manpower more desperately than ever. Its global visions – and illusions – cannot be attained without them. These visions involve a 'long war' against largely undefined, elusive terrorists and enemies in every corner of the globe for decades to come. Hence its renewed emphasis in its *Quadrennial Defense Review*, released this February, on Nato and mobilizing foreign troops 'to share the risks and responsibilities of today's complex challenges.'

Washington now favours a rapprochement with 'old Europe' and the nations it dismissed after September 11, 2001, and it wants to build a 'strategic consensus' and to expand Nato's role notwithstanding its resolution after the 1999 war in the former Yugoslavia to never again allow Nato's consensual voting procedures to constrain American actions – as, indeed, it has not. Its belief in the sufficiency of 'coalitions of the willing,' to cite Rumsfeld's words, has proven to be a chimera. In this regard, the Bush Administration now tacitly admits that its view after 2001 that it could pursue its global role alone was a colossal failure. The immense pressures to send troops to Afghanistan it imposed on The Netherlands reflects this desire to resuscitate and expand the Nato system.

The United States' 'ambitious agenda' was outlined by the US ambassador to Nato (and former aide to Cheney) Victoria Nuland's interview in the January 24 *Financial Times*. The US wants a 'globally deployable military force' that will operate everywhere – from Africa to the Middle East and beyond. It will include Japan and Australia as well as the Nato nations. 'It's a totally different animal,' to quote her, whose ultimate role will be subject to

United States desires and adventures. Nato must have a ‘...common collective deployment at strategic distances.’ Troops to Afghanistan are largely symbolic, a secondary issue to the much more important question of Nato’s future in American calculations over coming years. Nato, which was originally to be a European-focused alliance, would now become global in scope.

The official Munich conference on security policy in early February 2006 – which Rumsfeld attended along with Brent Scowcroft, former Defense Secretary William Cohen, and other advocates of the traditional Atlantic alliance – reflected the American desire to transform Nato so it will again be a useful weapon in its sheath of military choices – particularly its manpower. This is all the more essential because his plans for reforming the entire military will lead to a 20 per cent reduction of manoeuvre battalions in favour of larger headquarters and more high tech weapons, and soldiers on the ground will be scarcer than ever. It also wants the Nato states to spend more on their military forces, thereby relieving the United States from increasing its already huge budget deficit.

The Bush Administration’s ambitions for Nato are based on more ideological neo-con fantasies which must not be encouraged. The same American leaders have ignored their own intelligence to pursue ambitions which have traumatized Afghanistan and the Middle East, and today threaten the peace elsewhere. If its schemes for Nato that Nuland outlines gain the support of European states, then the United States is likely to commit more follies and create unforeseen miseries to fulfil its illusions.

American objectives – beyond fighting a war on ‘terror’ – are inherently indefinable as to length and location, but certain to be very ambitious. Fear is the adhesive that creates alliances and keeps them together, and the fear of Communism and the Soviet Union that led to Nato’s creation has been replaced by the fear of Muslim fundamentalism, terrorism, and the like. But just as the dangers of Communism proved illusory, so, too, will American threats of universal terror and chaos also prove to be a myth. The problem is what the United States will do before its allies grow tired of its paranoid politics. It has already said it wants Nato to send more troops to Kosovo so that it can ship 1700 American soldiers there to Iraq. The Netherlands has agreed to its demand on sending forces to Afghanistan, but it and all Nato members have to prepare for more troop requests in the future as part of ‘ambitious’ unilateralist Washington goals everywhere. That is the central issue that the Nato members must now confront.

The Nato contingents now in Afghanistan will not succeed where the Americans have already failed after four years to build a state no longer controlled by warlords, drug lords, and various Islamic fundamentalists. They will be shot at and killed, and the publics of the Nato states will become increasingly anti-war and vote out of office those who have obeyed American advice. They have already done so in Spain, they may do the same in Italy, and while Washington may win in the short run, ultimately there is a very good chance that its successes will produce a crisis in Nato – and perhaps the end of this organizational artifact of the Cold War.

In a word, we are at the beginning, not the end, of a profound crisis in US relations with The Netherlands and other Nato members. European nations may now articulate a political identity that is both in their national interests and conforms to their values – the very thing that the United States hoped Nato would prevent from occurring when it created it over a half-century ago. The Bush Administration may very well compel them to become more independent. That is to be welcomed.



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