

NATO vs CSTO: The Fogh of war

Written by Eric Walberg

Wednesday, 28 October 2009 06:21

NATO's reputation as the guardian of peace on Earth is in tatters these days. Once avowedly an alliance of North America and Western Europe to fight the communist hordes of Eurasia, it morphed into something quite different with the collapse of the socialist bloc two decades ago. It now pretends to unite all of Europe to fight the Muslim hordes wherever they be found and, of course the Russians, just for good measure.

To do this, it expanded rapidly in the past decade, and now has a Partnership for Peace with ex-Soviet hopefuls. It also has various formulas to incorporate Western-oriented Muslim nations, including the Mediterranean Dialogue (which includes Israel) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) minus Saudi and Oman). Morocco and Israel are further blessed as "major non-NATO allies" of the US. Even more ambitious is the GCC+4 (+ Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, US), heralded in 2007 as the "NATO of the Middle East", but then once-upon-a-time so was the ill-fated Baghdad Pact, originally called the Middle East Treaty Organisation (METO). The real "NATO of the Middle East" is of course US+1.

Whatever the US/NATO schemes and their pretexts, the results in recent years have been less than impressive. The communist hordes were soon replaced by the Russian and/or Muslim ones, and, despite the Mediterranean Dialogue and the GCC+2, the Muslim ones are multiplying daily. Even NATOphiles realise something is amiss. The newly appointed secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was so eager to transform the organisation he gave up his job as prime minister of Denmark, making him the highest ranking politician to take over NATO. "I want to modernise, transform and reform so that NATO adapts to the security environment of the 21st century."

Rasmussen points to the bloated bureaucracy, with its more than 300 committees -- all requiring decisions by consensus, and 13,000 personnel scattered across Western Europe at NATO's many military bases. When France rejoined the integrated military structure in April, it had to send 900 military staff to the various NATO commands. "In a rapidly changing security environment, we have to make sure that NATO is able to make rapid moves," asserts Fogh Rasmussen wistfully.

But his biggest move so far to reform the dinosaur was to appoint an "outsider", former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, to lead a group of 12 experts to work out a new strategic concept. Albright is hardly an outsider, being a key actor in the NATO bombing of Serbia which led to the creation of the first NATO satellite -- Kosovo, touted as a great success by NATOphiles, but as a violation of international law and relations by just about everyone else. It remains a basket-case, shunned by the likes of China, India and Russia. So don't hold your breath that Albright will spearhead a radical reinvention of NATO.

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NATOphiles ignore the obvious question about the organisation: why didn't it just disband when its mission to crush Communism was successful and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved? They also don't seem to feel it necessary to explain why a northern Atlantic organisation should expand into Eurasia and fight wars in Central Asia; why the UN is not the more appropriate forum for world security issues. The UN, famous for its own bureaucracy, has undergone considerable reform in the last decade and is certainly no more dysfunctional than NATO. It also has the advantage of bringing North, South, East and West together, guaranteeing a modicum of world consensus for any military action.

There is no hint within the NATO fortress that such questions will worry Albright's experts, or that they will consense towards anything other than making NATO an even greater threat to the diplomatic resolution of world problems.

Others are not twiddling their thumbs, however. The dogs may bark but the caravan moves on. Russia has been picking up the pieces in its foreign affairs since the regional alliance of Soviet days broke up and its place in the world as a counterweight to American diktat was lost. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was formed in 2002, bringing together Russia, Central Asian states Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, as well as Armenia and Belarus, and has been picking up steam in the past year, despite the difficulty of dealing with unpredictable member-dictators.

It is truly a regional pact with a legitimate reason for existing, unlike NATO. It was recognised by both the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the UN as such in 2007, and there has been talk of it becoming the genesis of a defence arm for the SCO. NATO's battering in Afghanistan has reduced it to asking for Russia's -- really the CSTO's -- participation in the Afghanistan operation, most obviously as the "northern corridor" transport route from Europe to Northern Afghanistan via CSTO member-states.

The CSTO is now working openly on a UN cooperation declaration similar to the one passed in September 2008 with NATO -- behind UN members' backs -- to work together against terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, and as part of peacekeeping missions under UN command. In addition to the UN, the CSTO has relations with the EU and the OSCE.

There is even talk of squaring the circle between the CSTO and NATO. Says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs, "Compared to the previous situation, when NATO did not want even to hear about the OSCE, now many officials and experts say that the CSTO can

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be a very useful partner.” CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordiuzha is less naive: “We proposed to NATO to cooperate in several spheres, including those regarding fighting illegal drug trafficking, but NATO has its own position.” Ironically, NATO’s Partnership for Peace includes all CSTO countries, so NATO has been cooperating with the CSTO by default all along, whether it likes it or not.

In addition to this startling outcome of NATO’s failure in Afghanistan, there are several interesting developments percolating that will soon provide a window into just which direction NATO will go in its latest mutation. Ukraine and Georgia are committed to join NATO, both with leaders swept into power by carefully orchestrated Western-backed campaigns, but who are now widely reviled. Does NATO still have the will and the way to snatch them up?

Another development is the recent mutual recognition of Turkey and Armenia, long-time foes. This reconciliation finessed their outstanding differences -- Armenia’s occupation of almost 20 per cent of Turkey’s natural ally Azerbaijan, and Turkey’s refusal to accept greater responsibility for the tragedy of ethnic Armenians who died fleeing civil war in 1915-17.

The EU took the credit for bringing the two sides together and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came to the signing ceremony, but it is far from clear which “side” will benefit most. Will NATO-member Turkey help usher CSTO-member Armenia into the Western fold? Or will Russia-friendly Armenia draw Turkey the other way? Will the EU’s spurning of Muslim Turkey and its desire to snag tiny Christian Armenia widen the growing rift between an increasingly independent and pro-Muslim Turkey and the West? Will Azerbaijan join NATO in a huff? Will Turkey dust off its Ottoman past and reinvent itself as a major regional power? The situation is far too complex to make any firm predictions.

Russia’s staunch defence of Iran in the face of Western threats and its increasing assertiveness in the face of NATO expansion are widely admired in the Muslim world, Turkey being no exception. Last year Moscow embraced Ankara’s proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform as a mechanism for political dialogue, stability and crisis management in a region covering Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Russia noted Turkey’s refusal to assist the US in invading Iraq or to allow a US warship into the Black Sea following Georgia’s attack on South Ossetia last year. Early this year, a Turkish mission visited Abkhazia.

During a state visit to Moscow by Turkish President Abdullah Gul in February, Russian

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President Dmitri Medvedev made a straightforward proposal to set up a Russian-Turkish axis. “The August crisis showed that we can deal with problems in the region by ourselves, without the involvement of outside powers,” Medvedev told a joint press conference. The Turkish leader effectively agreed, pointing to “substantially close or identical positions” the two countries took on “an absolute majority” of international issues.

But world politics is not all win-lose. Both Russia and the US, as members of the Minsk Group founded by the OECD to resolve the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, want to see that stand-off resolved peacefully. Making it happen would be a feather in US President and Nobel laureate Barack Obama’s cap and a concrete step in improving relations with Russia. A truly win-win situation.

As NATO continues to flounder and power continues to shift away from the US towards BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and the SCO, issues like the above will be shaped by a complex of forces, and their outcomes will not be enforced by any one diktat. Just as NATO’s Cold War nemesis unravelled with unpredicted speed, the seemingly immutable Western military alliance could find itself paralysed not only by its infamous bureaucracy, but by countervailing forces on the ascendant outside of its orbit.

All the Kosovos, Georgias and Azerbaijanians, all the GCC+2s, Dialogues and Partnerships in the world won’t be able to stave off the inevitable. Indeed, they can only act as a millstone, pulling NATO deeper into the quagmire it itself created during its short post-Cold War life as world policeman.

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