



NATO transformation is not possible by the old methods

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Shadow NATO Summit III, Washington DC, 14-15 May 2012

I want you to cast your minds back to Barack Obama's swearing-in ceremony for senior officials in January 2009 in which he said, "For a long time now there's been too much secrecy in this city", adding, "Transparency and rule of law will be the touchstones of this presidency. Starting today, every agency and department should know that this administration stands on the side not of those who seek to withhold information, but those who seek to make it known."

While President Obama was talking about Washington DC, he could have equally been referring to Brussels. And while most people equate a lack of transparency in that city with the institutions of the EU, it is my contention – and a key rationale for establishing NATO Watch – that there is a major democratic deficit at the heart of NATO. This deficit can be seen to exist at four levels:

1. The lack of transparency on the inner workings of the Alliance. Decisions of the North Atlantic Council (NATO's top authority) are expressed in communiqués but these are often bland and much other committee work goes unreported (e.g. the Military Committee, the Nuclear Planning Group). Moreover, most of the alliance's work takes place away from the glare of publicity in an assortment of projects involving numerous specialised agencies, centres, committees, groups and panels.

2. Secrecy and classification rules that are a legacy of the Cold War era. NATO is the only major intergovernmental body not to have even a basic information disclosure policy. There have been a number of interesting developments in the 'right to know' field recently, including a new information disclosure policy adopted by the World Bank and an interagency task force review of national security classification policy in the United States. NATO, however, continues to be a closed and secretive organisation distant from the general public.

3. Weak parliamentary and public oversight. Scrutiny certainly exists in national legislatures and parliamentary committees, and some very effective investigation has occurred of NATO missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya. This, however, has often been constrained by difficulties of accessing relevant information. Further, the role of national parliaments in its arguably most important function—of assenting to policy—is particularly underdeveloped. Many parliaments simply lack the power of prior authorization of national involvement in NATO military operations or of determining the length of time of any such deployment. Given the proliferation of NATO missions, this is a significant failing.

Further, because NATO lacks a dynamic treaty base (the North Atlantic Treaty remains essentially unaltered since its adoption in 1949) and legal system (akin to the EU) parliaments are rarely afforded the opportunity to debate and decide upon major initiatives within the Alliance. Executive prerogative often renders the positions of NATO members (and thus the eventually decisions reached within the Alliance) out of reach of parliamentary oversight. Finally, while many countries have held referenda on EU membership, few have held parallel votes on accession to the Alliance. And in the case of the Strategic Concept review process that was concluded in Lisbon in November 2010, as far as I am aware, only in one Member State, Germany, was a parliamentary hearing held to discuss the draft. I don't know about you, but I find that woeful.

4. Weak mechanisms of engagement. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly is unelected and, despite its title, lacks a formal connection to the Alliance. NATO also entertains little serious engagement with civil society. Its public diplomacy is more a means of transmitting policy than involving scholars, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) etc. NATO has also worked in the field with NGOs e.g. in Kosovo and Afghanistan, but these bodies have no lobbying or policy-shaping roles.

This democratic deficit matters for a whole host of reasons. It could be disguising mistakes and inefficiencies, and certainly encourages “business as usual” or “Group Think”. It also increases the vulnerability and malleability of public opinion in foreign affairs - at a time when current security threats, as in Afghanistan, are a matter of perception and judgement rather than fact. Moreover, current NATO operations involve real and growing risks and costs that need to be adequately explored and debated.

I would stress that this ‘democratic deficit’ is by no means all of NATO’s doing – NATO’s public affairs and diplomacy division, for example, has attempted to bring the Alliance closer to the people and often uses creative forms of social media to do so – but within the limitations of NATO’s own disclosure mandate and with a clear public relations remit. And the Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen initially placed a welcome emphasis on public consultation in the process towards a new Strategic Concept, which he correctly describes as “by far the most open and the most inclusive process of policy development NATO has ever conducted”. But in this regard NATO was starting from a historically low point of almost no consultation on earlier strategic concepts.

Another major problem is the dearth of what the *New York Times* describes as “the journalism of verification”: that is, discovering information, examining it for its truth and narrating it in a comprehensible way. Without such investigative journalism, there is a real danger of the official version of events becoming the only version. This is especially true when the media reproduce press releases from NATO or from the defence ministries of member states unchecked and unchallenged as the cheapest way to acknowledge new information. The contesting of official

versions of civilian casualties arising from drone-strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan is just one example of the important but diminishing role of good journalism.

The bottom line is that the vital habits of democracy are based around reliable sources of information and then deliberation and debate. NATO's purpose has to be clear to all citizens, and only then will they will be able to better hold it to account. So what needs to be done?

Three reforms are urgently required. **First, national parliaments in member states need to sharpen their scrutiny of NATO affairs.** At a minimum, this means each country establishing a permanent standing parliamentary committee dedicated to NATO. Outside of the US, NATO remains the cornerstone of every other member state's defence policy.

Second, the democratic mandate of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly needs to be strengthened. In particular, there needs to be greater accountability and openness about how members are selected. We need candidates of independent mind. Candidates who enjoy cross-party support. And candidates who have command of their briefs. At a minimum, the NATO PA representatives should be on fixed term appointments and subject to some form of intra-parliamentary election process (similar to that which has just been introduced in the UK for select committee chairs).

Third, NATO should adopt an information openness policy consistent with the access to information laws already in place in the Alliance's 28 member countries. Such a policy should include guidelines for proactive publication of core information, a mechanism by which the public can file requests for information, and an independent review body for hearing appeals against refusals or failures to make information public within a short time-frame.

Access to documents in NATO should not be a "gift" from on high to be packaged, sanitised and manipulated. The right of access to information is firmly established in international and national law as a human right and is essential for upholding the values which NATO was created to protect. It therefore applies to all national and international public bodies and should also apply to NATO. At the Chicago Summit this weekend wouldn't it be good to see the Heads of State announce new rules on NATO transparency and ethics, and like President Obama back in 2009, demand that officials disclose more information?

In conclusion, in order to deepen and extend the shared values-base within the Alliance, NATO needs to become closer to its citizens. This means an updated, more open, transparent and accountable Alliance, appropriate to 21st century expectations. Parliamentary accountability within NATO requires clear and adequate mechanisms, and a relaxation of secrecy rules.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to a vigorous discussion.