

TIME TO WRAP UP NATO

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 25 2010

It is getting boring. American officials make a stout plea for NATO assistance in some out of area effort, praising the alliance as vital to the security of the members and the globe. Meetings are held at which NATO officials underline the importance of the mission and its relevance to the alliance. Goals are set. The pundits agree that this call for united action is a vital test for NATO. More meetings are held, sometimes in top places. The history of the alliance is recalled, noting how the members stood together against the common foe. A few volunteers appear, but the overall goals are not met. Attention shifts. Meetings are held to celebrate alliance anniversaries with more dinners and introductions of recently appointed commanders and ambassadors. Soon there will be new pleas, new mentions of tests, and even more meetings and disappointment.

NATO had once a purpose. With an undeniable threat from the East, it was important to round up the nations that intended to resist, set up a command structure, and plan for the common defense. The war was eventually won. NATO didn't really shine much as an organization because only a few of its members carried most of the burden, but the symbolism of cross Atlantic unity that NATO provided was, no doubt, a minor advantage. Basically though the US outspent and outstared the Soviets while most NATO members watched.

The Soviet threat is gone and so too is the need to devote time to the celebration of common interests and sacrifice when there are no such interests or sacrifices. All the NATO commands and meetings are really quite meaningless. Some of members have fears, but they are not common ones. Those nations on NATO's eastern boundary worry that Russia may revert to its Soviet past. Those in the south worry about migration from poorer regions and ethnic conflict. The US worries about attacks from Islamic extremists, the drain of two significant wars, and its largely self-created and seemingly endless global obligations.

In the field NATO is mostly a joke. Some NATO troops are not allowed to fight. Others can't do anything without calling home. Most are in token formations dependent upon others for their transport and protection. Some fight hard, but are poorly equipped and are in small numbers. The American commanders fight on with only the most moderate of expectations about the NATO help they will get. The NATO involvement fools few.

Besides great dinners and cushy postings for some, NATO means little these days. Afghanistan is a war of choice in which most NATO members choose not to participate. There is no agreed upon common threat, no common purpose for NATO. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, it time for NATO to call it a day.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War*

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edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.