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NATO AT SIXTY-FIVE

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NATO, the military organization of the Atlantic Alliance, reaches the respectable age of sixty-five years old in 2014, which is no small achievement. Some call this the “third age”, others a “second youth”, but the truth is more complicated.

In 2014, NATO is above all a compendium of paradoxes. Although its profile is military, it is primarily a political alliance that has, from 1949 until today, traversed contemporary history: the Cold War, the fall of Soviet Communism—its real *raison d’être*, and these last twenty-five “post-bipolar” years, which are so complicated to understand.

The first paradox is that since 1949 its founding text, The Washington Treaty, or, more formally, The North Atlantic Treaty, appears to have fulfilled its function as an international agreement. It has not needed modification, except for two minor details: in 1951, a mention of the Mediterranean islands that are the territory of member states was added (for Turkey and Greece, who joined in 1951), and, in 1962, the anachronistic reference to the inclusion of “French departments” (such as Algeria) within the concept of territorial protection, disappeared. The independence of Algeria ended any debate about that. Now the key to the stability and immutability of the text is the fact that, even when you read it today (it is available on the NATO website), its formulation is so open, and it is so free from the specificities of any particular period of History, that it is applicable to all times. On the other hand, what has changed—more than once—are things such as NATO’s operational military structures, the growth in its membership to twenty-eight today, and other complementary structures.

But the paradox is to be found in the detail. Where the Treaty is very precise is in its geographical field of application, which is, literally, the North Atlantic, to the north of the Tropic of Cancer, including some Mediterranean islands that form part of the Alliance’s member states. It makes no mention, however, of any meridian: it puts no limits on action towards the east. So if the area is supposed to be confined, literally, to the North Atlantic Ocean plus the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia and every Greek and Turkish island and islet, then what is NATO doing in Afghanistan? In Brussels, the headquarters of the Atlantic Alliance, either there is little interest in these questions, or they raise a slight self-satisfied smile. But there is a disconnect between the letter of the Treaty and the operational dynamics of NATO.

A second paradox is even more serious. NATO fulfilled—about this there is unanimity among the experts—the role assigned to it during the Cold War: that of providing a military deterrent to the main (in fact, the only) enemy, the Soviet Union. No effective direct war broke out between East and West despite the fact that NATO and the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet bloc counterpart organisation) looked each other straight in the eye for forty-five years. There were a few scares: the Berlin crisis (1953, 1961), the uprisings in Budapest (1956) and Prague (1968), the unrest movements in Poland (1956 and 1981), the Cuban missile crisis (1962). In other words, the deterrent, seen from 2014, seems to have worked, because at least in Europe “nothing happened” directly between the United States and the Soviet Union (and their respective allies). To put it another way, we can consider that NATO worked based on never entering into operations—never, not a single operation. On the other hand, from 1991 on, with the Soviet Union gone, over the years the Atlantic Alliance has entered into operations several times—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, piracy in the Indian Ocean. The problem is that these operations—as well as they may have gone (and some did work in relation to their defined objectives)—do not give the sensation that they were entirely successful, even in cases such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. It is the problem of moving from theory to practice, things—just as in real life—often end up not going according to the instruction manual. This is not a minor paradox.

The third paradox is even more serious, and has been clearly evident in these twenty-five years of a “post-bipolar” world. NATO won the Cold War, few people doubt that, but it was left so disoriented by finding itself without a visible, credible enemy (when the Soviet Union ceased to be a direct threat) that it has still not recomposed itself. On the one hand, this is because it won the Cold War without any military battle, without the surrender of enemy troops. In fact, the adversary, playing “dirty”, became volatile and imploded. Perestroika began the work that enthusiastically finished with the fifteen federal republics that made up the USSR agreeing to become fifteen new, internationally-recognised sovereign states, which Russia has, since long before Putin, wanted to “bring home”, or at least within its sphere of direct influence. When considering the disquiet currently being experienced in Ukraine, it should be remembered that, since 1992, Russia has enabled, tolerated or protected at least five territorial amputations of neighbouring ex-Soviet states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and now parts of Ukraine. NATO, faced with this, can do little more than carry out symbolic manoeuvres in the Baltic States or Poland. The scenario of a real war with Russia is totally excluded, and, besides, articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty are restrictive: without a threat or military attack against a member state, NATO cannot act. This peculiar “worldview”, within which the Alliance has lived since 1992, is called strategic confusion.

That is why it is worth taking a look at an essential document in the NATO doctrine: the so-called Strategic Concept, which is the reference document that NATO produces regularly over time in order to establish its position in the world and the different hypothetical situations with which it may be faced. The current document is from 2010, the previous were in 1999 (for the 50th anniversary of the Treaty) and 1991. Those even further back, which are few and far between, are much more “Cold War”, that is to say, ideologically and operationally conventional. The one from 2010 (just like those of 1999 and 1991) deserves careful reading, because it describes this strategic confusion well.

In defence of NATO, however, we should ask ourselves: who has not been strategically confused for the last quarter of a century? Whether to adapt oneself to a world that is in full process of mutation and difficult to understand, or to give up, that is the dilemma.