

Whatever one thought of the Libya intervention, the details make for a bad advertisement about NATO. As one U.S. Air Force planner told Robert Kaplan of Stratfor, "It was like Snow White and the 27 dwarfs, all standing up to her knees" -- the United States being Snow White and the other NATO member states being the dwarfs. The statistics regarding just how much the United States had to go it alone in Libya -- pushed by the British and French -- despite the diplomatic fig leaf of "leading from behind," are devastating for the alliance.

More than 80 percent of the gasoline used in the intervention came from the U.S. military. Almost all the individual operation orders had an American address. Of dozens of countries taking part, only eight air forces were allowed by their defense ministries to drop any bombs. Many flew sorties apparently only for the symbolism of it. While most airstrikes were carried out by non-U.S. aircraft, the United States ran the logistical end of the war.

"Europe is dead militarily," a U.S. general told me. In 1980, European countries accounted for 40 percent of NATO's total defense spending; now they account for 20 percent. One numbered air force within the U.S. Air Force is larger than the British Ministry of Defense. Western Europe's military budgets are plummeting, even as their armed forces are not allowed by local politicians to do much besides participate in humanitarian relief exercises.

The strength of a country's military ultimately rests on the health of the civil-military relationship within its society. In the United States, there is much debate as well as tension regarding the proper role of a military in a democratic society. But through it all, Americans are deeply proud of their armed forces, even during wars that have become quagmires. For the most part, that is not the case in Western Europe, where the soldiers' profession is quietly looked down upon. (The United Kingdom, France and Denmark are among the exceptions.) Europeans tend to see their own armed forces members as civil servants in funny uniforms. The idea that it is the military that defends their democratic freedoms is something many Europeans find laughable.

Thus, one might conclude that NATO, which comprises the militaries of the United States and of most of the countries in Europe, is finished. Why bother with an alliance in which the overwhelming majority of its members have militaries that go unsupported by their own publics? Isn't the Libya intervention proof that even in so-called NATO operations, the United States does the work of the others without getting proper credit? Doesn't Afghanistan -- despite the blood shed by a few countries like Canada and Denmark -- constitute proof that NATO mainly constricts the actions of the United States without giving it proper battlefield support? Wasn't Kosovo proof that NATO is so cumbersome in its bureaucracy that it took many weeks to defeat a highly vulnerable regime in Serbia?

All this is true, but it is also beside the point. Even during the Cold War, NATO was wholly dominated by the United States. Moreover, northern European countries always did far more inside NATO than their southern neighbors, which from the 1950s through the 1980s were

mainly bribed and bullied to go along and be quiet. (And when someone protested, as Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou did in the 1980s, nobody cared.) But because NATO did not fight hot wars during the Cold War, this uncomfortable reality was obscured. Had a hot, conventional war erupted in the heart of Europe during the Cold War, the United States would have overwhelmingly dominated the Western effort.

Of course, during the Cold War NATO had a core purpose, which it lacks today: defending Central Europe against Soviet divisions. The disappearance of that core purpose immeasurably weakens NATO. And the withdrawal of two of the four U.S. Army brigade combat teams from Europe by 2014 will weaken it further, even with the missile deployments in Eastern Europe. But that doesn't mean the alliance has no uses.

In fact, the very weakening of the European Union because of its debt woes makes NATO more crucial than at any time since the Berlin Wall fell -- crucial as a political stabilizing agent within Europe itself. Especially for Eastern Europe, NATO serves as a seal of approval for these former communist states struggling to obtain foreign investment and thus prevents Russia from undermining them. Geography still rules. Russia, because of its own history of invasion from Europe, still requires a row of friendly buffer states in Eastern Europe. Therefore, Russia will do everything it can to undermine states from Poland southward to Bulgaria. NATO is a political, diplomatic and military mechanism directed against that Russian design. Moreover, the more that Europe reels from its debt crisis, the greater the possibility of geopolitical inroads made by Russia, and thus the more relevant NATO becomes.

NATO is also relevant concerning the future geopolitical direction of Germany. As long as NATO exists and Germany is a member, playing a substantial political if not military role, then the chances of Germany pivoting toward an alliance with Russia in future years is lessened.

Analytically, it is a mistake to assume that just because a political-military organization is less useful now than it was a quarter-century ago it is useless altogether. NATO has a bureaucracy, protocols, interoperability between member militaries and all manner of standard operating procedures honed over decades that would simply be irresponsible to get rid of. NATO can act fluently in humanitarian emergencies with which European publics are comfortable and thus somewhat reduce the burden on the United States. NATO, like the United Nations on occasion, still provides diplomatic cover of varying degrees for American actions. NATO is American hegemony on the cheap. Imagine how much less of a fiasco the Iraq War would have been were it a full-fledged NATO operation, rather than a largely unilateral one. Without organizations like NATO and the United Nations, American power is more lonely in an anarchic world.

Aside from the mundane security details provided by some NATO countries in Afghanistan, NATO is not going to get much better at fighting hot wars because Western European publics are not willing to pay the budgetary price that hot wars entail. In any case, land engagements are especially problematic for militaries in pacifist-trending societies. NATO might be ideally suited for air and naval rescue missions in Africa and points beyond. But NATO will be kept alive so that it can continue to serve as a vehicle for European political coherence. The "smart defense" initiative is a case in point, whereby individual countries will increasingly coordinate their weapons acquisition policies. For example, the Dutch are disbanding their tank battalions

and putting trust in German units and others to defend Dutch territory. With the savings, the Dutch are investing in ballistic missile defense radars for their frigates, a capability that will benefit all alliance members.

Those who casually belittle NATO assume that Europe will face no geopolitical nightmares in its future. But that assumption might be wrong. Just look at these revitalized military configurations: a Nordic Battlegroup to include the Baltic and Scandinavian states as well as Ireland; and the Visegrad Group to include Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These might on some future morrow partially replace NATO; but they might continue to fall under the NATO umbrella. And they are all responses to a militarily powerful Russia lying to the east.

A more dynamic Russia, a more chaotic North Africa and continued unrest and underdevelopment in the Balkans might all pose challenges to Europe. If they do, NATO will provide a handy confidence-building mechanism. The United States needs NATO to help organize European defense, precisely so that Washington can focus on the Middle East and Asia. NATO is not great, but for the time being it is good enough.

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