

■ Address on NATO's New Strategic Concept

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Summary Overview

Ten years after the last comprehensive review of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Strategic Concept, the process was started to update the document. The Strategic Concept is a vision of the tasks and priorities NATO should have in order to overcome threats to its member nations and to promote their common values. Since the last version was adopted in 1999, NATO had become involved in the war on terrorism with operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was invited to present the keynote address to all gathered in Brussels to initiate the process. As a former chief diplomat and ally of the sitting president (Barack Obama), Albright had the credentials that commanded her respect, and yet as a private citizen she also had the freedom to freely express her own opinions.

Defining Moment

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded in response to the growing strength of the Soviet Union in Eastern and Central Europe. The imposition of Communist-controlled governments in the various nations between the Soviet Union and East Germany, and from the Baltic Sea in the north down through the Balkans, terrified the United States and the Western European nations. As the Soviet Union more strongly unified these states in January 1949 within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the Western nations created NATO in April 1949. While primarily a military alliance, it was also an entity that promoted democratic ideals. Until 1991, the focus of NATO was on the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact (formally created in 1955), but that ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

During the 1990s, NATO found a new mission, trying to restore peace to the warring states and ethnic groups in the Balkans. Although the military operations were outside the territory of the NATO member states, the threat created by instability in southeastern Europe gave ample justification for the mission. The Strategic Concept of the Alliance, as revised in 1999, reflected the need for this type of military operation for the member nations.

The year 2001 brought a new challenge and a revised interpretation of its Charter. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States resulted in a response not just by American forces but by NATO as well. Article 5 of the NATO Charter stated that an attack on any member state would be interpreted as an attack on all member states. When this was written in 1949, the expectation was that an attack would come from a non-NATO organized state, which meant the attacker had a government, a territory, a population, and a formal identity. Those who attacked on 9/11, however, had none of these things: they were "nonstate actors." The members of NATO decided that the scope of the attack was such that a unified response was justified, and that the response could be carried out inside the territory of the nations that seemed sympathetic toward or supportive of the terrorists. This resulted in NATO-sanctioned operations in Iraq, in 2001, and Afghanistan, in 2003, both of which actions were very different from anything envisioned in 1949. Thus, the 2009 Conference in Brussels was designed not just to tweak the previous document, as had sometimes happened in the past. Madeleine Albright gave the keynote speech as a call for those gathered to *transform* NATO from a relic of the Cold War into a vital organization for the twenty-first century and the new War on Terrorism. Her strong words helped set the tenor for change.

Author Biography

Madeleine Albright (1937–2022) was named Marie Jana Korbelova at birth in Czechoslovakia. The family fled the Nazis, going to the United Kingdom, first, and then after the war to the United States. She adopted her longer maiden name as a youth and took her husband's last name when they married in 1959. She graduated from Wellesley College and earned a master's and PhD from Columbia University.

Albright was active in Democratic campaigns beginning in 1972 and worked in the Carter administration. When Bill Clinton was elected president, she was appointed to be the ambassador to the United Nations (1993–1996) and then was the first woman to be appointed secretary of state (1996–2001). Afterwards, she formed a consulting group dealing with interactions between government/politics and business. She stayed active in international affairs, such as serving on the board of directors of the Council on Foreign Relations.



Historical Document

Address on NATO's New Strategic Concept

Madeline Albright

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Mr. Secretary-General, thank you so much for that introduction, and I'm delighted to be here; Mr. Secretary-General designate and Excellencies, and special guests, it's wonderful to be here on this afternoon.

This is such a distinguished audience. I can only include—conclude that Atlanticism is alive and well. And, I really would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General [Jaap de Hoop Scheffer] for inviting me and also congratulate him for his years of outstanding leadership.

Mr. Secretary General, you have guided this organization brilliantly and will leave to your successor an alliance that is strong, cohesive, and as central to global security as it has ever been. The world owes you a debt, and I hope that in years to come you will continue to share your wisdom with all of us.

When I was Secretary of State, I often came to Brussels to present the official policy recommendations of my government. And today, I am here in an unofficial capacity, but my enthusiasm could not be greater—for NATO has always been very much a part of my life.

It's birth was hastened by the Communist takeover in 1948 of my native country of Czechoslovakia. From then until the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO had the dual role of shielding freedom in the West while preserving hope in Europe's East. And as a daughter of Prague living in America, I had one foot on each side of the divide.

A decade ago, I had the privilege of welcoming Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic into our alliance and of working with many of you to end the terror and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. As these events reflect, NATO has been the most successful alliance in history. As current events dictate, it remains a preeminent actor on the world stage. So I'm delighted to join with you in launching an effort to revise and update NATO's Strategic Concept. Our goal should be a statement whose meshes is clear to audiences, both within and outside the alliance, a text that will serve equally as an internal guide and as a constructive signal to people of all ages and cultures around the world.

We begin that task with the wind at our backs. In many of our now 28 capitals, there's a fresh commitment to the success and vigil—and vigor of our alliance. In Washington, a new Administration is emphasizing a comprehensive and collaborative approach to human security with NATO at its core. The French have sent a powerful message of support by rejoining NATO's military command. And as was evident during the Summit at Strasbourg/Kehl, alliance members are in general agreement about NATO's primary missions and international role. Each ally has committed to an enduring transatlantic link; and each supports the doctrine of collective defense; and each understands the need for adaptation; and each believes in our partnerships; and each is dedicated to NATO's values.

Drafting a new Strategic Concept, therefore, is less a question of reinvention than of refinement. We have a firm foundation upon which to build. This does not mean that our job will be easy or that NATO's future is assured. Almost 20 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, our alliance is still in the process of adjusting. The Cold War was bitter, but also fairly stable—with relations kept in place by an Iron Curtain and a concrete Wall.

Today, political dynamics are more fluid—and so are the dangers. Serious threats emanate from viral ideologies, failed states, irresponsible leaders, dangerous technologies, and environmental neglect. This toxic blend demands a multi-faceted response: the NATO of the 21st century must combine political wisdom with military clout and diplomatic skills; it must be versatile and adept at preventive action; and it must be counted on to deliver whenever Euro-Atlantic security is on the line.

These imperatives should guide the day-to-day management of our alliance; they should inform the budget and policy decisions of each alliance member; and they should be at the heart of NATO's new Strategic Concept.

In drafting that document, we might remind ourselves that NATO has never defined its purpose in terms of what we are against. From the very beginning, we have described our common agenda in positive terms—to safeguard freedom, promote stability, uphold the principles of democracy, and to extend the rule of law.

These objectives are not tied to any calendar, nor are they dependent on any particular adversary. They will survive as long as we have the courage to defend them, but defend them we must, for in the future as in the past, our interests and ideals will surely be opposed.

It's no secret that Al Qaeda and its allies have made themselves the enemy of all who value human dignity and life. Their attacks have triggered a worldwide confrontation marked by incidents of outrage from New York and Istanbul to Moscow and Madrid, and from the Horn of Africa to the London

Underground. But if there is a center to this struggle, it is in Afghanistan, spilling over into Pakistan's fiercely independent western frontier. And that's why it matters so much that each alliance member do all it can to support NATO's mission in that part of the world.

The good news is that the Afghan people know what living under the Taliban is like and do not wish to repeat the experience. But to capitalize on that, Afghanistan's government must provide an effective alternative. Through its presence and by its training, NATO can help the country's legitimate leaders to provide the security and the opportunity their people so desperately need.

If we're patient in our approach and wise in our strategy, we can improve the prospects for stability in Afghanistan and throughout the region.

But if we grow frustrated or fail to make a maximum effort, we may witness the rise of yet another generation of terrorists, and see a nuclear-armed Pakistan pushed to the brink.

Elsewhere around the world, NATO must cope with the danger posed by nuclear activities occurring outside the safeguards established by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. North Korea and Iran especially merit our concern. Few developments would be more troubling than the emergence of new nuclear weapons states.

A three-part response is required.

First, our alliance should insist that nuclear programs be legal and consistent with a stable and peaceful world order.

Second, we should be vigilant in protecting our people from the possible misuse of advanced weapons and missile technologies.

And third, we should be united in our support for arms control and for a future in which nuclear weapons play an ever-diminishing security role.

A further source of 21st century danger is one painfully familiar to students of history—and that is cross-border military aggression. Although such incidents may occur less frequently now than at times in the past, there will always be some governments that are tempted to intervene in the affairs of neighboring states.

NATO's core purpose has been and must remain to make attacks against its own Members unthinkable. We should also work through the United Nations to see that, in any place at any time, aggression does not pay.

Finally, there exists a viper's nest of additional dangers—some originating with states, others with groups or even individuals. And these include cyber sabotage, biological and chemical contamination, organized crime, and piracy. Each is a threat to world order. And each places new demands on the capabilities of our alliance. And each requires fresh thinking about how to adapt and apply NATO resources to cope with diverse problems.

In planning for the future, we must bear in mind that although NATO is a leader, it must also be a partner. As we have learned in recent years, most security crises have political, economic, social, and sometimes religious dimensions. An effective response may therefore depend on a pooling of talent and a sharing of tasks.

Our Strategic Concept must recognize that NATO's work will often rely on a comprehensive approach, involving cooperation with other parts of the international system, including the UN in all its aspects, the EU, the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe], the African Union, and other regional organizations, and major non-Governmental organizations.

Alliance operations will also be influenced by NATO's global standing. It matters how our efforts are viewed in such capitals as Delhi and Islamabad and Pretoria and Cairo, Brasilia and Beijing. We cannot simply assume that our intentions will be understood correctly, especially in parts of the world that have hostile or mixed feelings towards the West.

The NATO story is a proud one, and even glorious, but it has grown more complex as new chapters have been written. Each year, across the globe, there are fewer people who recall NATO's creation, fewer who remember its Cold War resolve, and fewer who have a clear sense of why NATO's survival and success should matter to them.

So as we think about our Strategic Concept, we should bear in mind how such a document will be read not only within the Euro-Atlantic community but in every region. And as we prepare to implement that concept, we must include a plan for explaining our policies and our actions persuasively and in real time, making full use of modern information technology.

We're in this room today because we believe in the ongoing importance of NATO's mission. But our challenge is to reach and to teach the billions of people who are not in this room. We must convince them that even while protecting the rights of alliance members, NATO will uphold the rights of all.

To illustrate that truth, we must back our words with actions, but we must also be wise in the words that we choose. The original North Atlantic Treaty consisted of 23 sentences. Our current Strategic Concept has 65 paragraphs. If we want NATO's purpose to be understood, we must speak in language that

average people can actually understand. Clear writing is a reflection of clear thinking and clear thinking is indispensable to NATO's future.¹

Of course, much of our thinking in recent times has focused on the scope of NATO's activities and missions. A consensus exists that, to protect our interests, we must sometimes act outside our borders, as we have done in the Balkans, and as we are doing now in Afghanistan and through our maritime operations. Some suggest that these external missions have opened a fault line within the alliance, placing on one side those who believe that NATO should assume the role of global police and on the other those who insist that NATO stay close to home.

In truth, I see no such fault line but instead a sensible search for a reasonable balance. There are limits to what NATO can do and also to what we should attempt; we are a regionally-based security alliance and cannot be all things to all people.

And at the same time, we must not settle for the role of turtle, hiding in our shell while external dangers flourish. Article V and collective defense remain, properly, the cornerstone of our alliance. However, we must also be prepared to respond to threats that arise beyond our territory, taking into account the urgency of those threats, the availability of other security options, and the likely consequences of acting or of failing to act. We are a defensive alliance; but we cannot afford to be a passive one.

A similar sense of balance is necessary when contemplating another potential source of division within NATO—and that's Russia. President Obama has just been—and is in Moscow; and if you've all watched the news he has had a remarkable meeting not only with President Medvedev but with Prime Minister Putin, and has just delivered a great speech.

On both sides, there are expectations mixed with uncertainty. Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community have an armful of shared interests, but we also have a handful of significant differences. And that's why our Strategic Concept must be flexible enough to embrace Russia as a partner and firm enough to hold the Kremlin to its obligations. Ultimately, only Russia can define Russia, just as only NATO can define NATO.

Our alliance must make decisions about future members based on qualifications alone—neither asserting nor recognizing a sphere of influence, neither opposing nor appeasing the government of any other country. No nation can dictate to another what alliance that country may or may not join. When I was Secretary of State, we agreed then, when discussing security in Europe, that Russia was entitled to a voice but not a veto. And I believe that principle still applies.

Years ago, during the Cold War, NATO's main objective was to defend freedom from the threat of aggression by the Communist Bloc. When the Berlin Wall fell, we set our sights on a Euro-Atlantic community that was whole and free. And today, we understand that neither the defeat of Communism nor our own freedom is sufficient to guarantee security. NATO must strive for a world in which differences are resolved without violence; where people are allowed to live without fear of aggression or attack; and in which the rule of law is legitimately-constituted, broadly-recognized, and widely-enforced.

By its nature, this is an enterprise to be waged on many fronts, simultaneously and continuously. And it will lead not to some climactic or universal triumph, but to the hope that our children can grow up in a world more peaceful, free, and humane than it has been. And for that to happen, NATO must operate in the future with all the energy and focus it has shown in the past. And each member of the alliance must meet its obligations fully and without fail.

Looking back, we can see that many of the threats we faced in the past have vanished or shifted in shape.

And looking ahead, we can expect that many of the problems we worry about today will also wax or wane.

Global and regional dangers must naturally command NATO's attention, but these impermanent perils must never define our alliance. In 1949, we came together not because we were afraid, but because of our faith in the values of democracy, free expression, and respect for the dignity of every human being. And we have learned since that our organization must constantly adapt to the demands of political and technological change. But we have also learned what must not change: NATO's Strategic Concept must begin and end with NATO's founding ideals. And just as surely, NATO's future will depend on its unity.

Years ago, Thucydides wrote that the Peloponnesians and their allies were powerful in battle but handicapped by political divisions. Each pressed for its own agenda, each thinking that others would act in time to preserve the common cause. But because each operated under the same illusion, the alliance soon forgot its purpose and was ruined.

This must not happen to NATO.

The world remains too dangerous, and the role of our alliance too vital.

And our shared vision of the world remains too important for us to lose our way now.

So let's begin the task of charting NATO's future with confident hearts, bearing in mind our responsibility to those who preceded us, and to all who are among us, and to future generations.



Glossary

Al Qaeda: a Sunni Islamic extremist organization founded by Osama bin Laden that declared a holy war against the West, which included the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States

Iron Curtain: a term coined by Winston Churchill and denoting the almost impenetrable barrier between Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: a treaty designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, with a provision that nuclear states should use their technology to assist non-nuclear states

Document Analysis

In her strong keynote address, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright calls on the gathered representatives of the NATO countries to create a new Strategic Concept document, which would enable the organization to remain the world's "leader" in seeking to maintain a secure and peaceful world. Article 12 of the treaty establishing NATO called for a review, after ten years, of the treaty and any "factors affecting peace and security in the North Atlantic area." Thus, the 2009 gathering was one of a series of meetings to accomplish that aim. Albright calls for a refinement of purpose, based on the events since the last, 1999 review. While NATO was never only a military alliance, Albright advocates that NATO move beyond an emphasis of primarily being a military alliance and become an organization that mixes strong efforts at diplomacy with military strength. She wants the members of NATO to be vigilant, prepared to act, and united in purpose.

Albright, and many others, had a very positive outlook on the strength and role of NATO in 2009. One of the most important recent changes was the fact that France, one of the original NATO members, had reintegrated its armed forces with NATO, after having withdrawn them in 1966. At that time the events in Iraq were seen as a victory for NATO, and it was working with a friendly government in Afghanistan, with an election scheduled there for August 2009. While the world may have seemed more complex than sixty years earlier when NATO was established, the general trend seemed to be toward the expansion of democracy across the globe at a greater pace. To solidify that trend, Albright recommends that the members of NATO vigorously support the organization and be prepared to implement the goals to be adopted in the new version of the Strategic Concept.

Albright, of course, was conscious of the fact that even though Cold War had ended, Russia, as heir to the Soviet Union, remained a Western rival to which the alliance needed to pay attention. Unlike with the Cold War days, however, she understands that there were areas of immediate concern besides Russia. Thus, she speaks openly of "failed states, irresponsible leaders, dangerous technologies," as well as

terrorist organizations and the spread of nuclear weapons. For her, issues arising from these situations and groups appear very likely to cause problems for NATO in the near future. Thus, she says that the gathering needs to work on a document that is "less a question of reinvention than of refinement." In her mind, NATO was strong and would remain so as long as it emphasized the positive aspects of global justice and the "values of democracy."

Essential Themes

The original 1949 "The North Atlantic Treaty," also referred to as the "Washington Treaty," focused on the territory of the member nations and the North Atlantic region, specifically mentioning the Tropic of Cancer as the southern boundary of its area of concern. Albright spoke of the threats that she believed were paramount in 2009, and these went beyond the North Atlantic. Those threats included the continuation of terrorist attacks (large scale and localized), the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons, and traditional military aggression between nations. In 1949 the main threat was perceived to be a military attack by the Soviet Union and its allies, similar to the military aggression mentioned in her speech. However, given the increased complexity of international affairs over the decades, Albright felt compelled to urge NATO to create responses not only to problems arising in the region traditionally covered by the treaty but to those arising in related areas as well—and not just responses but preventive measures too.

Albright's speech is notable for its clarity and directness. Although her academic and professional background often exposed her to complex documents full of obscure terminology and "bureaucratese," she hoped that the forthcoming revision to the Strategic Concept would be equally clear and direct. She notes that the Concept is not just an internal document written for the twenty-eight-member nations, but is one that has global audience and impact. Although the focus of NATO was the northern trans-Atlantic region, the concerns and actions of NATO had already moved beyond that geographical region. It had expanded eastward in Europe and undertaken missions outside its boundaries. Thus, for the NATO

Strategic Concept to have its greatest impact, the people, organizations, and governments around the world need to understand both what it says and what it means in terms of those who make threats against NATO members. To achieve this, she called for unity among the members in seeking the goal of “peace, justice, development” throughout the world. The outcome of the revision process, several months after this speech was delivered, was a document that was in line with the ideals and goals that Albright had set out in this speech.

—Donald A. Watt, PhD

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