



How to Neutralise NATO?

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A few months ago, in my article titled ‘How to conquer a nation in 20 years?’ I philosophised on slow war. My starting questions were: What if you were forced to take your time to conquer the neighbours? Say, your invasion must take 20 years; how would you plan it?

Later I wrote a food for thought paper, in Dutch, under the title ‘What If the US Would Leave NATO?’ In that paper I considered the whys as well as the scenarios of a possible US exit out of NATO. The purpose was to study this eventuality to consider the best course of action as a European nation member of the Alliance.

It didn’t take long before my brain started combining the two thoughts. Not that I see the US willingly neutralising NATO, but there may be other parties interested in doing just that. The Russians are ‘fighting’ NATO with a hybrid strategy¹. Although not a new approach, hybrid warfare has been defined as a combination of conventional, irregular, and asymmetric means supported by effective communications. Reacting to this kind of warfare is difficult for NATO as the activities stay below the criteria for an Article 5 of the Washington Treaty reaction, in fact below the threshold of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. Others use terrorism, also not a new form of warfare, as the preferred means to stop the influence of NATO. The topic of counter-terrorism is therefore another hot discussion topic in the halls of NATO HQ.

It is a normal, military strategy to focus one’s destructive energy on a weak member in order to break a coalition. But NATO is not a purely military alliance, although the armed pillar is a strong one. What if an adversary would attack NATO at the political level? Suppose the Russians combine their hybrid capability with the fundamentals of slow war to flip a member nation? It is sure not an impossibility! The expansion of NATO further increases this vulnerability.

How to flip a member nation is not the purpose of this article, I want to consider the ‘What if a member nation flips to an adversary?’ To make it really difficult for NATO, this change in regime should be done in a ‘democratic’ way. I purposely added single quotation marks to stress that it must not be a real democratic process as long as the perception is there, it will do the job. Creating that

¹ An article published under the name of Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov in the Russian newspaper Voenno-Promyshlenni Kurier in early 2013 initiated the belief that the Russian operation in Crimea (and subsequently in Eastern Ukraine) heralded the emergence of a new Russian form of “hybrid warfare,” reflected in what has become known as the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ or ‘Hybrid Warfare’. This supposedly new form of war conferred numerous advantages on Moscow, observers argued, since it heightened the sense of ambiguity in Russian actions, and provided Russian leadership with an asymmetric tool to undercut Western advantages: since Moscow would be unable to win a conventional war with the West, it seeks to challenge it in other ways. Furthermore, it fits readily into Western debates about the increasing roles of Special Forces and strategic communications in conflict.

perception is just another challenge for the strategic communication element of a hybrid warfare opponent.

So, one morning the NATO members wake up to discover that one of them has a strange² affiliation. From that day on, that nation could block all initiatives against and support all decisions deviating efforts from its sponsor nation. This would be possible because of the coherent use of the (negative) consensus principle in the Alliance. How could they react?

Article 13 of the Treaty foresees the possibility for a member to quite the Alliance: “any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given”, but that article does not make it possible for members to jointly expel a nation. So as long as a nation wants to stay member nothing can be done.

Of course, the others could work in a ‘minus 1 format’ but under the consensus rule, NATO as a whole would not be able to reach a decision. While some collective actions would be possible, the Alliance would soon turn into a hollow exercise.

The other option is for the other nations to quit NATO, but that would mean handing over the organization to the ‘sponsor nation’. Quite an uncomfortable thought.

Is there a way out? Let’s revisit the consensus rule.

The ‘consensus rule’ has been the cornerstone of NATO’s decision-making process since the signing of the Washington Treaty in 1949³. However, the idea that all decisions reached within the Alliance must be agreed upon by all member nations is not directly mentioned in the Washington Treaty, or anywhere else in official NATO documents, but it has been the sole basis for decision-making in NATO since its creation.

Consensus is not just required for the most important decisions within the North Atlantic Council (NAC), but also throughout the structure of the organization, including (almost) every committee and working group. While sticking steadfastly to the consensus rule gives the Alliance a credibility on the world stage not seen by any other alliance in history, many experts and critics argue that this decision-making process should be reconsidered and adjusted. They argue that as the Alliance continues to grow and expand its geographical focus outside traditional European borders, the use of the consensus rule must be scrapped to keep the Alliance agile and adaptable.

The question here is not about agility or adaptability, albeit very important issues, it is about survival. The paragraphs above indicate that it is possible to circumvent the consensus rule because it is not an integral part of the Treaty. However a call for caution is in place here, a sudden deviation from normal practice could strongly undermine the credibility and an Alliance is as strong as it is credible. Also NATO has no experience with other rules for decision-making. Using these for the first time in a crisis situation could be very difficult and very risky. The learning curve would also give the sponsor nation extra time to execute its plans, whatever these may be.

² I use ‘strange’ to keep my arguments general and not limited to one possibility.

³ LtCol Lauren G. Traugutt, ‘Is Consensus Still Necessary in NATO?’, NDC Report, June 2016.

The positive news is that NATO can be protected against an insider scenario, however to execute it successfully the organisation should start thinking about the 'hows' of this kind of 'minus 1' decision-making process. And of course in the spirit of NATO Education, Training, Exercise and Evaluation, these procedures should be tested, trained, exercised and communicated. The latter is necessary as the simple fact that NATO considers the introduction of a non-consensus approach will certainly be useful in a hybrid strategy.