

Developments in NATO' s strategy

CORNELIUS DE JAGER*

The political aim of NATO is to defend NATO territory as far forward as possible. The question then is, how to defend it and with what. The answer is to be found in the field of strategy and the measures needed to implement that strategy.

How to defend and with what is not a matter of «the more the better», rather it is a question of «how much is enough» or «how little is sufficient» to defend our territory or, in other words, to maintain our common freedom of action as independent sovereign nations.

If there is a threat to our territory or to our freedom of action we have to build up a capability to defend ourselves and/ or we must try to negotiate «away» that threat. However, reductions should always be mutually balanced, controlled and verifiable. In this context armament and disarmament are opposite sides of the same coin.

Strategy is a process of thinking; an analysis of relevant factors to come to a synthesis: a strategic plan that is suited to the aim for which it was designed under the prevailing circumstances. Therefore a strategic plan can have only a limited life because circumstances may change in such a way that a re-evaluation, a new analysis, becomes necessary.

These circumstances may be related to changes in the assessment of a potential aggressor, in our case for instance, changes in the Soviet bloc strength and capabilities, or they may be related to changes on our own side.

Factors which might contribute to this are, among other things, available resources, manpower or emerging technologies, or indeed political resolve.

So strategy is a dynamic process. Now the question arises: is that dynamic process, that development, applicable to our NATO strategy as well?

We know that in the past different strategic concepts have come into force. Also from time to time we hear remarks that our present strategy of *Flexible Response* should be

* General holandês, Presidente do Comité Militar da NATO.

reviewed again. Arguments are different and divergent: the Flexible Response strategy is not flexible at all; the gap in the balance of forces is too wide to make our present concept credible; the role of nuclear weapons is no longer justifiable.

In order to find answers, or a basis for answers, to these types of questions, I will discuss:

- the historical background
- the present situation
- aspects for future developments.

Historical background

In order to understand developments in our strategy it is important first to have as good an idea as possible question: why should we defend, and against whom? In other words, the nature and scope of the threat.

It is not a question that is easy to answer. In the context of a presentation like this, one runs the risk of over-simplification and/or dangerous generalisation. Nevertheless, let me attempt to make a judgement about the people and the nation that constitute our potential threat, their way of strategic thinking and their capabilities.

In East/ West relations, the Soviet Union is the dominating state on the Eastern side and is one of the two superpowers of our time.

The Soviet Union is a massive country which can defend itself with practically no essential need to rely on sea communications.

It is a closed and uncommunicative country which does not easily admit strangers, and in which even its own inhabitants are restricted in their travels.

It has a long history of expansion and build-up of forces, presumably seeking parity of status with the United States. It also has a long history of conflict and invasion.

A dominating factor of Soviet behaviour is their fear of aggression and a deep sense of insecurity based, among other things, on their experiences during World War II when more than 20 million Russians were killed.

The Soviets have respect for force and they despise weakness. A compromise is considered as a symptom of weakness. They are convinced of the supremacy of the communist ideology.

They maintain very strong armed forces, which they do not hesitate to use whenever they consider the moment opportune and the price limited and acceptable.

Strategic thinking

With regard to their way of strategic thinking we run the risk of projecting our conception on them, presuming that they think along the same lines as we do. This is certainly not the case.

Strategic thinking in the West is strongly influenced by the theories of von Clausewitz, although sometimes wrongly quoted and/or interpreted. From two of the various elements of war, von Clausewitz says that: «war is an act of force ...» and that «war is merely the continuation of policy by other means».

Against this theory the view of Lenin is that «warfare is not only a military act of force but is also diplomatic, psychological and economic in character». He learned that «the soundest strategy in war is to postpone operations until the disintegration of enemy morale renders a mortal blow both possible and easy». In other words, «the act of force» is not follow-on to failing but to successful politics.

Obviously, we are confronted with a different way of strategic thinking. A much broader way with a specific place for armed forces.

Although these theories are already many years old, there are no indications that much has changed. In his book «The Seapower of the State», first published in 1976, the Soviet Admiral Gorshkov, later Deputy Minister for Defence, points out that he who controls the sea, controls the land around it, and at the end of his conclusions he writes «the sea power of our country is directed at ensuring favourable conditions for building communism, the intensive expansion of the economic power of the country and the steady consolidation of its defence capability»...

Soviet capabilities

When we look at the build-up of the Soviet forces, we then touch on the growing disparity, the widening gap as it is called, in the balance of forces between East and West, which shows that the Soviet Union has much more armed forces at its disposal than would be necessary to defend itself.

With regard to conventional weapons, it is no longer true that they have to compensate for a qualitative inferiority by a quantitative superiority. Both quantity and quality are growing. The build-up of their naval forces, not necessary for the defence of Soviet lines of communication, goes far beyond what is necessary for sea denial to NATO's sea lines of communication.

The same concern goes for the build-up of their strategic nuclear forces, as they possess large numbers of different types of missiles with high throw-weight, high accuracy, high survivability, and with a great spread of ranges.

All this should lead us to the question: why is the Soviet Union building up such an enormous military power, both nuclear and conventional?

Surely, we must assume that the Soviets also seek security and peace, as we do. However, we must ask ourselves whether words such as «security» and «peace» have the same meaning for them as they have for us, and whether the Soviets would rather seek a peace based on dominance than a peace based on a balance of forces.

What their true intentions are we shall never know. However, faced with a nation that over a very long period has pursued its interests in both extending power and in spreading communism seeking security at the expense of another's insecurity – it means for the West that we must ensure that it will never serve a Soviet interest to attack us, and that we offer no risk-free opportunities to them for them to exploit.

From the foregoing it seems logical to come to the following conclusions.

It could be of interest to the Soviets:

1) To neutralise Western strategic forces which could inflict severe damage upon Soviet territory and thus limit to a great extent their freedom of action. Ways to achieve this goal are:

- the build-up of a strong strategic force;
- attempting to drive a wedge in the Alliance and depriving Europe of American participation with nuclear weapons;
- not accepting anything like SDI.

To improve still further their conventional forces both in quantity and quality to support
2) a strategy and policy of peace by dominance – a peace on their terms.

NATO strategy

The question which we are faced with is: what should our reaction be? Should we posture a weak attitude to avoid provoking aggression? Or, should we posture a strong attitude to defend and deter and, at the same time, to have an *entrée* to the conference table?

Deliberate weakness or strength, both have been tried in the past, deliberately or not. It has become clear that one cannot prevent war, either nuclear or conventional, by ignoring the possibility of it happening.

In considering the best attitude for the West, we must be aware that a nuclear war is possible, although less probable in view of the mutually assured destruction. But there is always the possibility of a nuclear war through escalation of a conventional conflict. Therefore, even a conventional conflict. has to be avoided at any price.

To implement a policy of defence there are several ways in which a strategic concept and military forces could be organized.

Although the creation of an offensive force could, theoretically, meet requirements, it would be in violation of the NATO Treaty and has to be excluded.

That leaves us with the following options: the creation of

- a defensive force, or
- a retaliatory force, or
- a combination.

In the development of NATO's strategy, we see that a varying policy has been carried out. Ouring certain periods the emphasis was laid on retaliatory forces, on defensive forces, or a combination of the two.

With defensive forces we try to make clear to the aggressor that: aggression will not *succeed*. With retaliatory forces one can make it clear that aggression will not pay.

Retaliatory forces should not be confused with offensive forces, because these forces are limited to a strategic nuclear role and do not comprise the required other forces, conventional included, to support an offensive strategy or policy.

NATO started with primarily a retaliatory force (1949: the Guarantee Pact). Because this was considered not to be a credible strategy (period 1950 Korean War), NATO switched to the idea of creating a defensive force (Lisbon goals: 1952). This turned out to be too costly, so NATO opted for a combination of defensive and retaliatory forces with an emphasis on retaliation (the trip-wire strategy: 1957). Again it was considered not to be a credible strategy so the combination remained and the emphasis shifted to more conventional forces:

- to create flexibility in response to a variety of possible forms and places of aggression;
- to raise the nuclear threshold and create a better margin in support of the decision-making process.

This strategy, known as Flexible Response, was adapted in 1967 and still is our strategy today.

The present situation

In my introduction I made some remarks about criticisms of that strategy. That leaves us with the question of whether this strategy is still valid? My answer to this question is yes. Our strategy is still valid and a sound basis for further planning for our security.

It would be wrong to think that since 1967 no further developments in our strategy have taken place. It is true the basic document is still the same, however to understand our strategy we must take into account other documents as well, such as the Ministerial Guidelines that are given regularly, declarations by Heads of State or by NATO Ministers. In these documents further plans of action are developed, for instance on the relation between armament and arms control, or on NATO's position *vis-o-vis* conflicts outside the NATO area.

With regard to measures to implement our strategy, it can be said to be a constant process that is part of our rolling system of force planning.

What then are the answers to the potential threat I mentioned earlier? As I said, it could be of interest to the Soviets to neutralise the NATO retaliatory force and to improve their conventional force to achieve a capability to dominate.

Based on this assumption, it is in the interest of the Alliance to persuade the East that it is better to achieve a secure force balance through dialogue and negotiations rather than by an even more costly arms race, because imposed insecurity, by a dominating opposing force, will never be acceptable to the West.

In the meantime, and as long as there are no achievements, NATO must ensure that the cohesiveness for a collective defence remains firm, and that the viability of retaliatory forces, which is an integral part of our strategic concept, is maintained. Although the retaliatory forces are mainly US forces, the viability is, and should remain, a matter of concern to us all. It is important that modernization continues and that the effectiveness and survivability of that force, whether at sea, in the air or on land, in the USA or in Europe, by passive or active means, becomes and remains high.

One could call it a paradox, but the strategic nuclear forces, representing an ultimate answer for our deterrent, are vulnerable. This in fact is the case for both East and West, and the situation is accepted by both sides and laid down in the ABM Treaty of 1972. Since then it has been reported that the Soviets have made research developments and taken certain measures, along with the build-up of a very strong nuclear force, to diminish their vulnerability.

It was in this light that the President of the United States took the initiative to stimulate a research programme, for possible or eventual improvements to defend the indispensable retaliatory force for NATO.

With regard to conventional forces it is evident that adequate deterrence requires that we possess strong enough conventional forces. Not as a stand alone conventional force, matching the East in equal numbers, but as an integral part of the overall capability with conventional, theatre nuclear and strategic nuclear forces.

One can approach the question of how many and what types of conventional forces from different angles. In the light of the opposing capabilities a good approach is that we must organize our conventional forces so that:

- we are not taken by surprise and
- we have the maximum freedom of action to conduct our defence.

To avoid surprise we need to have modern standing forces, available in the right place in an appropriate state of training and readiness to receive and respond to the first

blow, together with an intelligence and warning system as well as an effective command-and-control system which is indispensable for the right reaction in the event of aggression.

To create the maximum freedom of action, air defence and the protection of our lines of communication, at sea, on land and in the air, must be maintained to enable us to defend and reinforce with forces from overseas and with mobilized forces.

Much has been done in the past to improve our conventional forces and with considerable success. However there is still a lot to be done to keep and improve the necessary flexibility needed to implement our strategy in the light of the widening gap in the balance of forces and, furthermore, to prevent early recourse to nuclear escalation if deterrence fails.

Many ways for further improvement of our conventional forces have been studied and further actions are imminent which are directed towards eliminating the present shortcomings and weaknesses as well as towards making better use of available resources.

The use of new emerging technologies might help us. In order to structure work and activities, a first conceptual military framework for long term planning was established as a basis for setting out priorities for the selection and application of emerging technologies in meeting military requirements.

Flexible Response is the best strategy

In concluding it can be said that, due to the insecurity we are faced with, and after a period of development, the Flexible Response strategy is sound and is still the best strategy we can have under present conditions.

It is a defensive strategy and aims at deterrence by a selective combination of retaliation and defence. It is a defensive strategy that aims at a no first use of any weapon as long as no aggression occurs. The availability of nuclear weapons does not make our strategy an offensive one. It is the other way around. NATO's policy and strategy dictate the role of these weapons: similarly new initiatives for the possible use of new techniques do not form a basis for changing the strategy but dictate rules for its implementation.

Likewise there is room for improvement of our conventional forces to make and keep our Flexible Response really flexible, with no risk of surprise.

We must do better and can do better with the resources available to us. Combined co-operation in the field of armaments is essential.

Projecting our requirements on a longer term must further be worked out so that better and co-ordinated use can be made of new techniques.

Harmonization of strategy and the measures necessary to implement that strategy is essential.

At the same time negotiations for mutually controlled and verifiable arms reductions must be continued, so that in the end we may achieve a balance of power at a lower level, for less money and all the freedom of action we need.

We live in times of great and rapid technological change, and with the encouraging signs of political advance for East-West relations. However, while recognizing all the social and economic difficulties, we must ensure that whatever else we do, in the face of the ever present threat, the credibility of our deterrent posture be maintained.