

Stronger Political Structures for NATO

GENERAL JAMES JONES

Outgoing Supreme Allied Commander Europe



General Jones (left) and North Atlantic Council Members on a visit to Kosovo, May 2006
NATO photos, 2006

The outgoing Supreme Allied Commander Europe, in a parting session with the Atlantic Council of the U.S., has called on December 21, 2006 for strengthening NATO's structures and reliability for the long haul. He focused on two aspects of this, which have long been central to the project of the Streit Council: using more efficient joint decision-making procedures than the past reliance on consensus, and using common funding so countries can participate in common actions without a financial penalty. The complete address can be found on the Atlantic Council of the US website. Following are the key portions of his remarks.

On the matter of transformation: as well as we've done on the military side, the other piece of transformation that has not been done to the secretary-general's satisfaction or to anyone else's is the accompanying transformation of the political process. The political institution of NATO to support this expeditionary capability is still very much in the 20th century as a military capability is becoming a 21st century force. And those two things are kind of at odds.

Beyond Consensus

My recommendation and my parting message to NATO, for whatever it's worth, is that we really take a look at the second piece of transformation now and start fixing the system so that as NATO becomes even bigger, that the political processes by which decisions are taken, by which we decide how we spend our money or how we acquire

things, can, in fact, be somewhere in parallel with this new state-of-the-art capability that we're trying to get to in the military side.

Fred Kempe (President, Atlantic Council of the US): What you're basically saying is that the political is falling behind the military capability. So,

NATO will have to address whether you want 350 committees all acting on the rule of consensus.

21st century military capability and aspirations and 20th century political consensus. What concretely needs to be done on the political consensus side? Is it doing away with consensus voting on decisions?

Jones: How we spend our money, what we spend our money on is definitely still in the 20th century. And sooner or later, NATO will have to address whether you want 350 committees all acting on the rule of consensus. Is that really how you get your best advice? At some point, if the North Atlantic Council gets bigger and bigger, they'll

have to address that.

Kempe: One gets rid of consensus. That means that the French and others don't have the ability — as a single country — to block NATO going forward.

Jones: Well, you do have to ask yourself that. If you've got 24 countries lined up and want to do something of a certain stature, what's the logic of one or two countries being able to block that? Why not have a system where they can just opt out? Which is actually what many countries did in supporting the NATO training mission in Iraq. There are quite a few countries that said: Okay, we'll support the mission, but we're not sending any troops there. And we said: Fine, we'll do it. Those are some of the flexibilities that could come NATO's way and ought to be discussed, so that the institutional part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization can in fact support what we're trying to do to make NATO more agile, more responsive and more capable.

Common funding

One of the things that I would add to the list — particularly for rapid missions, expeditionary-type operations, NATO Response Force missions — is that I believe common funding is the answer. I believe that we have to remove the disincentives for nations to contribute forces.

For example, the Czech Republic has one of the few existing assets in chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological forces. We can't expect the Czech Republic, every time an NRF goes out, everybody wants that capability, to foot that bill the whole time.

NATO operates under the "costs fall where they lie" principle, which means if you contribute forces, you pay for it. And that was great in the 20th century, because forces weren't going anywhere. It was a reactive alliance. We were going to absorb the first hit. And every year maybe forces went from Germany to Holland or, you know, moved a few hundred miles, but they really

didn't go very far. So having nations absorb that cost was not particularly difficult.

Now you've got, you know, 32,000 soldiers in Afghanistan. You have a mission in Africa. You've got Operation Active Endeavor. You've got troops in the Balkans. Nations are having to absorb that burden.

Political interference in Military Advice due to consensus procedure

I think the Military Committee of NATO, which is supposed to give the military advice, is in danger of becoming overrun by the early input of political influence before the military advice is developed. And I think we ought to organize ourselves in such a way that the military advice that is rendered stays as pure as possible until there is an appropriate time for the political process to take place.

The advice comes from the strategic commanders as an operational commander, for example, into the Military Committee. And the Military Committee's system of discussion is very similar to the North Atlantic Council's. In other words, countries can break silence, countries can block military advice from going forward. It's the infusion of national politics on military advice at a very low level that causes military advice to be distorted, to be tweaked and to lose its essence. And I think it has to be pure.

I think there are ways in which you can do that. Some structural reorganization could be done that preserves the integrity of that military advice for a little bit further into the process.

Strong alliance

Still, the alliance is an incredibly healthy organization. I know of no countries that are trying to leave the alliance, and I know quite a few that are trying to queue up — to measure up to achieve full membership by as early as 2008. □

We have to remove the disincentives for nations to contribute forces. I believe common funding is the answer.