NATO’s Cohesion Through 2035 and Beyond: Risks and Opportunities

Framework for Future Alliance Operations, March 2018, NATO

Problem statement
Cohesion is arguably the strategic centre of gravity of the Alliance. This study aims to understand what the risks and the opportunities to NATO’s cohesion are through 2035 and beyond. Developed in connection with the guiding document Framework for Future Alliance Operation (FFAO), the study is particularly interested in the perspective of the future young leaders. Security trends identified in the NATO’s Strategic Foresight Analysis 2017 constitute its point of departure in analyzing Alliance cohesion in the future. In the context of the rapidly changing and increasingly complex security environment, NATO nations will likely face growing nationalism and populism, which could result in widening social inequalities and polarized societies. Fractured societies are likely to have divergent threat perceptions. Lastly, inequitable sharing of the security burden may continue to damage Euro-Atlantic relations.

The present study builds on the scholarly literature to identify the factors that positively or negatively contribute to Alliance cohesion in general. The study then uses both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the young generation’s perceptions of the future risks and opportunities to NATO’s cohesion. These data will be gathered through an online survey and a series of focus groups. The findings will inform the FFAO document in order to provide NATO Allies with an informed perspective on how to prevent the Alliance’s cohesion from eroding.

Research Questions
- **Primary:** Which factors are likely to affect NATO’s cohesion through 2035 and beyond?
- **Sub-Questions:**
  - What are the major risks to NATO’s cohesion through 2035 and beyond, and why?
  - How do these risks to NATO’s cohesion relate to one another?
    - What is the severity of each risk to NATO’s cohesion through 2035 and beyond?
    - What is the probability of each risk to NATO’s cohesion through 2035 and beyond?
  - How can NATO avoid those risks from materializing?
Definitions

Cohesion is central to the Alliance since it directly relates to its ability to persist and to generate pro-active policies, and ultimately makes positive difference to effectiveness of Allied missions. Cohesion can be understood as “bonds, either social or task based, that contribute to the synergistic functioning of [NATO] as a whole” (Salas et al. 2015). Put differently, the most important manifestation of alliance cohesion is “the ability of member states to agree on goals, strategy, and tactics, and coordinate activity directed toward those ends” (Holsti et al., 1973, p. 16).

Centre of gravity represents “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act” (JP 5.0, xxi). Alternatively, it is a specific moral centre in the form of a community of interests; the centre of gravity does not necessarily mean characteristics, capabilities, or locations (Strange and Iron 2004, p. 26). The centre of gravity metaphor underlines the importance of alliance cohesion, since targeting the center of gravity by an enemy “can cause the object to lose its balance, or equilibrium, and fall to the ground” (Echevarria II, 2003, p. 3).

Scholarly literature on alliance cohesion

The classical realist strand of the alliance cohesion theory puts forward that alliance cohesion is strongest when the group of allies face a clearly identified external adversary (international conditions, balance of power [Morgenthau 1948]). Realist institutionalism puts emphasis on the importance of the level and source of threat to alliances to develop a more nuanced hypothesizing: alliance cohesion is determined by the dynamic between the different levels of threat both inside and outside of the Alliance (balance of threat [Walt 1987, Weitsman 2003]). The low level of internal threat explains why NATO, once its main external threat disappeared, persisted and maintained its cohesion after the Cold War. Collective action theory claims that alliance cohesion is maintained by security benefits provided by the bigger members to smaller states. It then follows that alliance cohesion is dependent on the commitment of the powerful allies (Weisiger 2016). Liberal institutionalism connects alliance cohesion to institutionalization of military cooperation on a day-to-day basis and a high level of organizational development (Wallander 2000, Keohane and Wallander 2002, Pohl 2016). Sociological approaches to cohesion focuses on NATO’s common identity and norms, shared values and interests, and socialization of political and military elites as the sources of alliance cohesion. Cohesion flows from the degree of security community among democratic allies (Risse-Kappen 1996, Flockhart 2016).

It is important to note that sources of cohesion differ once the alliance enters a war. Cohesion during warfare has more complex dynamics; it is dependent on the mutual agreement on war aims and strategies to achieve them, and then on how the allies translate these aims and strategies into fighting effectiveness (successfully coordinating troops and managing interoperability). The alliance’s internal dynamics change in accordance to the alliance security dilemma: while peacetime alliances are dominated by the fear of entrapment, wartime alliances are plagued by the fear of abandonment (Snyder 1997, Weitsman 2013).
Methodology

The goal of this study is to identify and evaluate future risks and opportunities to NATO’s cohesion from the young generation’s perspective. The target audience are future leaders between the ages of 18-35. To understand their perspectives, this study uses grounded methodology and employs both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research strategy:

1. Literature review to identify sources of alliance cohesion, discover which explanations are the most common;
2. Pre-test: a session with the ACT interns; to validate the predefined categories to be used in the survey;
3. Online survey to collect quantitative data (closed questions, descriptive search);
4. Focus groups to gather qualitative data in the form of further exploratory research:

References


