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Nato's dissolution is long overdue

If the alliance cannot prevail in Afghanistan, what price its continuation at all?

Mary Dejevsky

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With the number of British and US casualties rising, the [election results](#) mired in complaints of fraud, and the Obama administration still reviewing its strategy, the war in Afghanistan is at once in crisis and in limbo. It is no wonder then that the [Prime Minister](#) should have started the new political term by trying to convince British opinion that this operation still has purpose and, more to the point, an end.

But the future of [Afghanistan](#), of great geopolitical significance though that has to be, is by no means all that is at stake here. Looming behind the growing public debate about what this war is about and whether we British should be fighting it is quite another discussion: about the future or otherwise of Nato – the Western defence alliance that has endured for the past 60 years.

Where more than two or three [military](#) or defence specialists are gathered together, the war enters conversation not just as a make-or-break point for Afghanistan, but as make-or-break for the Nato alliance. If, it is argued, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, under whose command this war is being fought, cannot prevail – and, equally pertinent – be seen to have prevailed, what price the continuation of the alliance at all?

There are three main strands to the argument as it has developed so far, though with many gradations in between. The defeatist one would be that the alliance has outlived its usefulness. The second strand, you could describe as the reformist one, would be that the alliance has a future, but must change in line with changing times. And the third you could describe as the nostalgic strand: Nato, so its adherents would maintain, has done an excellent job, is essential to future global stability and needs less change and more belief.

I make no apologies for belonging to the first, rather small, camp which is hardly admitted to the debate at all. My firm conviction is that Nato should have declared victory and dissolved itself at the end of the Cold War. There are many reasons why this did not happen, including the considerable confusion at the time, the preoccupation of Western leaders with other matters, not least the hugely controversial reunification of Germany, and the uncertainty about how Russia and the former Warsaw Pact countries would develop.

But the dissolution of Nato would have sent the message – still not really heard in Moscow or points east – that the Cold War is over. If disbanding was thought a step too far, Nato could, as an interim measure, have honoured Bill Clinton's early pledge that the alliance would not expand – as it subsequently did – up to Russia's borders. A simple [name change](#) and clarification of mission could have been a first step to the alliance, perhaps, becoming the core of a regional military force for the UN. It would have allowed Nato to cast off its image as directed exclusively against Russia and helped dispel east-west antagonism. An opportunity was lost. Ever since, the alliance has been looking around for a new purpose.

Afghanistan represented one key chance, lost and belatedly reclaimed, to find one. When Nato invoked its famous Article 5, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US seemed unenthusiastic. To Washington, operations under Nato auspices risked becoming bogged down in quarrels about targets, as the intervention against Serbia over Kosovo had done in 1999. For better and worse, though, Afghanistan was designated a Nato operation, which is why, now it is in trouble, it is seen as "make-or-break" for the alliance.

After eight years of this intervention, the allies are at sixes and sevens, and you don't have to listen to defence specialists for long to hear bitter national resentments. Viewed from London, Britain is shouldering a disproportionate burden; the French and Germans are not pulling their weight. Viewed from Paris or Berlin, the British are only where they are because they demanded to make themselves indispensable to the US (preserving the special relationship and all that). Viewed from Washington, the Brits are trying hard, but are so lamentably equipped as to be almost a liability in the front line.

The discord in Afghanistan is compounded by differences about the focus of Nato policy – is it any longer about Russia or mostly about the rest of the world? And this lies behind a discussion just launched by Nato's new General Secretary, the Dane Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to agree a new "strategic concept" for the alliance. He has appointed a panel of 12 advisers which is supposed to come up with its blueprint by late 2010.

Given the depth of existing disagreements, one can only really wish the group of 12 good luck. And this will be especially needed, given that some particularly vocal participants in the debate will represent the third, nostalgic, strand of opinion. The UK, represented on the panel by the former defence secretary, Geoff Hoon, may well be among them.

Any far-reaching change in the alliance and its priorities is likely to be seen as a threat to the Britain's "special relationship", with the US. Obama's view has always seemed to be less romantic than London's; indeed, it is not unreasonable to ask whether, deep down, he believes it still exists at all. Nor is the return of France to the Nato command structures necessarily good news for Britain, unless we accept that the so-called European "pillar" of the alliance should be strengthened. As a project, that might well entail sacrificing the "special relationship" on intelligence-sharing and Trident renewal in favour of enhanced London-Paris defence cooperation. How would that look to a [government](#) led by David Cameron?

The nostalgic wing of Nato received new succour from the accession of the "new" European states, which still wanted protection from Russia. But with more realism now setting in, at least in Poland, less ideology and more pragmatism in the US, and a less strident and more domestically preoccupied leadership in Russia, the prospects for Nato reform could be more favourable than for some time, speeded by fear of failure in Afghanistan. Britain has some hard thinking to do if it does not want to be the odd man out.