Book Review

Gülñur Aybet and Rebecca R. Moore (eds.), NATO in Search of a Vision. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press 2010. 288 pp. $29.95 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5890-1630-9.

The authors of this edited collection of original essays argue that despite its wider engagement in global missions and partnerships, post-Cold War NATO remains troubled by the absence of a grand strategic vision to guide its activities in the 21st century. The book incorporates two groups of essays: The first discusses the role of strategic documents, political leadership, and demographics in shaping the Alliance’s new identity and vision; the second addresses specific aspects of its transformation. The latter include but are not limited to NATO’s new complex operations and partnerships, as well as the enlargement process and its implications for relations with Russia.

NATO in Search of a Vision was completed only several months before the official launch of the 2010 Strategic Concept, thus making insightful observations and valuable suggestions regarding the content of the new concept which was released several months later. Jamie Shea attributes NATO’s special role in international security to its capacity to forge consensus among allies, a capacity that has proven good at escaping crises or “unchangingly skillful in using them to good effect” (p. 18).

Ryan Hendrickson’s work focuses on the role of individual leadership style and personality of the NATO secretary-generals. It contrasts the leadership styles of the Cold War secretaries who have been largely unable to advance their own independent strategic visions with their successors in the 1990s and 2000s who played a more significant role due to the new mechanisms introduced in 1991. Gülñur Aybet draws an analogy between NATO’s Strategic Concepts and the Grand Strategies developed by great powers to provide a “clarified vision of common transatlantic norms and values and a better working relationships with other institutions” (p. 45). Finally, Jeffrey Simon surveys the changing demographics in the United States and its European allies including the age structure, ethnic makeup, and defense spending of these societies. He predicts that the ongoing dynamic on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean will impact the identity of the member-states and could lead to the renegotiation of the transatlantic bargain.
The relationship with Russia is a central topic of the volume and is addressed in three of the essays. Roger Kanet argues that even though the confrontation in the relations between Russia and NATO is not pre-ordained, the key developments in the past two decades (such as the Alliance’s expansion close to Russia’s western borderlands, the use of force against Serbia in 1999, and the plans for the anti-missile defense system) have been viewed by Moscow as direct challenges to its own security. Martin Smith notes that the institutionalization of the NATO-Russia relationship was originally met with distrust in Moscow but later developed a significant “breadth and depth of consultative agenda.” Nonetheless, after the 2008 War in Georgia, Kremlin appeared to “make a deliberate effort to convey the impression that they frankly did not care if the relations were ruptured” (p. 121).

Sean Kay explores the implications of a possible deployment of anti-missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Smith and Kay’s analyses predict that institutional cooperation with Russia “premised on a common vision of security goals and objectives, or shared underlying values” is not likely to advance in the near future. They argue that, in order to facilitate a more cooperative approach, the United States and NATO need to freeze the anti-missile defense programs and emphasize strong working relations with Moscow.

The volume also touches upon the advancement of new capabilities, which combine military and civilian efforts (such as Combined Joint Task Forces and the NATO Response Force) needed for the new non-Article Five missions, as well as institutional cooperation, especially with European Union and the United Nations. It concludes that the “honing of resources to operate more effectively” is among NATO’s major challenges in this area (p. 88).

Rebecca Moore pays special attention to NATO’s enhanced cooperation with global partners beyond Europe such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Global Partners Initiative (including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea). Like most edited volumes, NATO in Search of a Vision lacks a comprehensive framework that explains the driving forces behind the Alliance’s new vision. The editors claim that NATO has always been an integral part of a “western security community constructed around norms and values of a liberal order based on democratic governance and free market economies” (p. 243). Nonetheless, they also admit that since the late 1990s the Alliance’s role in international security has been defined by the increased demand for new missions. This is not a ‘troubling trend’ but a sobering reality that many allies (both old and new ones) do not always understand and occasionally fail to address adequately.

The volume does not discuss in detail NATO’s changing identity as a result of the expansion in the 1990s and 2000s. Despite the fact that Gabriele Casone brushes off some implications of the enlargement process for the
countries from the Western Balkans, the volume as a whole does not highlight the fact that NATO is not a strictly ‘western’ alliance anymore; it also fails to explain adequately how the new members participate in reshaping its new vision and identity. In conclusion, despite some weaknesses, this collection of essays is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on post-Cold War NATO; it raises pertinent questions and sharpens the scholarly debate on the future of the Alliance. It is a must read for students and practitioners of NATO politics, transatlantic relations, and international security and institutions.

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