Globalized Risks, Transformative Vision, and Predictable Problems

Paul Schulte
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This paper examines the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) description of its emerging security challenges agenda. While not disputing the need for better coordinated international action, the paper surveys a number of areas in which there may be difficulties for allied governments, Alliance politicians, or other international actors in supporting, appreciating, identifying, and sustaining NATO’s new contributions to international stability.

DEFINITIONS

Emerging security challenges mean just that: security risks that are new in Alliance terms, because they are not fundamentally military in nature and are not therefore amenable to defense and deterrence by military means. A recent online NATO briefing document listed the following areas as currently constituting Emerging Security Challenges field:

- The fight against terrorism
- NATO’s Defense against Terrorism Program
- Weapons of mass destruction (WMD)
- Missile defense
- Cyber security
- NATO’s role in energy security
- Counterpiracy operations
- Relations with nonmember countries
- Relations with the United Nations
- Relations with the European Union
- Relations with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

At the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, terrorism, cyber attacks, the proliferation of WMD, energy vulnerabilities, and environmental constraints were highlighted as emerging security challenges. This was not, apparently, because they covered all the new threats (no mention was made, for example, of pandemics or organized crime) but because these are the areas in which NATO’s essential military capabilities were assumed to be able to add value to broader international efforts.
So emerging security challenges may emerge, evolve, and change in relative severity and attention over time. It follows that present descriptions or lists can only be provisional and that within them priorities may change.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE VISION AND THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: THE EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES DIVISION

NATO Secretary-General Anders-Fogh Rasmussen’s creation of an Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD), said to have been a personal and top-down decision, has been emphasized not just as an internal exercise but also as “a strong political message.” In August 2010, around 50 staff members from NATO’s International Staff and International Military Staff were moved to the ESCD. Operating under zero-budget-growth rules (that is, at the expense of existing NATO departments), the new division was announced as comprising five units dealing with terrorism, cyber defense, energy security, strategic analysis, and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Center. This organizational reconfiguration enables NATO to proclaim, for the first time, that it has systematically brought together work on the areas that will increasingly affect the security of allies on both sides of the Atlantic, in civil sectors as well as the military field.

It is accepted that, at first glance, these challenges look very disparate. But, conceptually, NATO now argues that they belong together: not only because they share certain common characteristics, but also because addressing them will help achieve the desired transformation of the Alliance. NATO will have to change its thinking about Alliance solidarity and its interactions with the broader international community, notably with civilian actors and the private sector.

The first common characteristic of these challenges is that they do not necessarily affect all allies in the same way. A terrorist attack on a single ally may generate collective concern but not automatically be regarded as an attack against the Alliance as a whole. Similar reasoning holds for a cyber attack on an individual ally’s banking system or energy supply. Decisions about responses would have to rest first and foremost with the country that had been affected.

Unlike during the Cold War, when a Warsaw Pact attack on one NATO ally was explicitly declared as certain to trigger a collective response by the other allies, today’s challenges may not lend themselves to quasi-automatic reactions. So NATO allies need to redefine the way in which they express solidarity in a range of entirely new scenarios.

A second common characteristic of the new challenges is the fact that they do not necessarily require a military response. A well-orchestrated cyber attack might paralyze a country in ways that could previously only have been achieved by a foreign invasion; yet if the attackers were an nongovernmental organization, for example, NATO would hardly be able to threaten military retaliation.

The proliferation of WMD may well require new military means of protection, such as missile defenses. But dampening proliferation incentives by resolving regional security problems and applying diplomatic and economic “sticks” and “carrots” will remain the preferred approach. In short, while transatlantic cooperation remains indispensable to cope with the new security challenges, NATO has concluded and loudly declared that its military “toolbox” is not sufficient.

If the Alliance wants to remain an effective security provider for its members, its officials are emphasizing in their speeches that it must become a team player (“part of the chorus rather than the leading tenor or soprano”) in new fields such as cyber security, critical infrastructure protection, or counterterrorism detection technology. NATO officials acknowledge, probably wisely, that this will require a difficult and long-term transformation.

Thus the third common characteristic of the new challenges is that they are foreign and domestic, as well as military and economic, and so require a “holistic approach.” In concrete terms, NATO explains that this means it needs to build structured relations with a range of civilian actors.
This applies not only to the other major international organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union (EU), but also to nongovernmental organizations and private sector companies in, for example, the energy or IT sectors. The expectation is that all these actors can be helped to become partners in addressing the security challenges presented by globalization. Partnership with a wide range of international and national bodies is a repeated theme in NATO’s emerging security challenges literature (which echoes a similar stress on public-private partnerships for the provision of public services in contemporary public economics9). Given the vast differences in goals, mandates, and working methods, building trusting and effective relationships between these various bodies is seen as an “arduous but indispensable” process.

**INITIALLY PREDICTED DIPLOMATIC COMPLEXITIES**

It is not clear how this process of partnership building will unfold internally or externally. NATO concedes that some allies may argue against the potential militarization or “securitization” of a range of issues, like energy or proliferation, which they feel ought to remain primarily political, economic, or technical. Certain member states may also fear that dealing with these new security challenges will divert NATO’s attention away from its core task of collective defense.

NATO accepts that opposition of this kind can only be dispelled if allies devote more time to discussing emerging challenges, with the expectation that they will then reach a consensus. In recent years, managing NATO’s operations, such as those in Afghanistan and Kosovo, has taken up most of the allies’ attention and focus, at the expense of discussing future challenges.

So NATO statements refer to the need to find a new balance between the present and the future and to develop a culture of political discussion, which is not confined to issues that directly involve NATO militarily but which also includes those that may have “only” political relevance. “The new challenges cannot be confronted through the mathematical construction of a set of military forces or by the threat of military retaliation.”10 NATO claims that it appreciates its own weaknesses, including the tendency to view every issue as bearing on possible military operations. It stresses that this will have to change if “forward-looking, enlightened debate” about emerging twenty-first-century challenges is to emerge.

The ESCD is expected to contribute to this new culture of debate. Its strategic analysis capability is intended to scan the strategic horizon for challenges capable of affecting allied security. The products of that horizon scanning are then intended to stimulate debate among allies and reinforce NATO’s unique value as a key forum for transatlantic security consultation.

**PROGRESS TO DATE**

NATO is still inevitably at an early stage in its ambitious new agenda. The Alliance can most obviously point to some progress thus far:

- Far-reaching wording in the Strategic Concept
- A new division in the International Staff, with hitherto unprecedented horizon-scanning responsibilities
- Ongoing work in the cyber-security area, including a new contract on improving NATO’s own cyber-defense capacities

Whether it can establish stronger ties with other actors, and create what it calls a more forward-looking debate among allies, is uncertain. But these are the elements that NATO admits will shape its approach toward emerging security challenges and the significance of the role it now says it wants to play in their management. NATO stresses its awareness of the profound changes in its structure and policy that will be required: a new business model in which the Alliance becomes an additional contributor to prevention, recovery, and overall resilience rather than acting as total guarantor of collective security against military attack.

The Alliance has proclaimed itself ready to embrace these changes, “because Allies have understood that only by embracing change will the Atlantic Alliance be able to live up to its role as an anchor of security in a globalized world.”11
The announcement of the emerging security challenges agenda therefore represents a high-stakes declaration by which a range of observers, many of whom could be structurally disposed to be unsympathetic, will come to judge the Alliance’s contribution in new fields.

**PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS**

The problems and threats represented by new security challenges are real, and the aspiration is commendably ambitious: a comprehensive (and expandable) risk management contribution for many of the problems of a fractious and globalizing world. But the initial context for a project of such scope is not promising. The Alliance faces some loss of confidence over prospective failure in Afghanistan and a sense of inadequate military preparation even for the apparently simple problem of collective security—Article V tasks.\(^\text{12}\)

And, while the rhetorical emphasis on embracing change as a precondition for the Alliance’s continuing central role is understandable, it could also prove presentationally unfortunate. Critics may point to disturbing resonances with the “out of area or out of business” arguments of the 1990s, which led to the Afghanistan engagement. It would be an easy step then to argue that emerging security challenges are the last resort of an organization in search of a convincing role.

New challenges will have to be managed in the era of austerity and declining national budgets. Not only is NATO starting its Emerging Security Challenges Division off at the expense of other parts of headquarters, but its staff will presumably not be able to propose big projects with long timescales or large footprints.

**WIDESPREAD AND FORESEEABLE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND IDEOLOGICAL TURMOIL, BUT NATIONAL JURISDICTIONAL DIVISIONS**

There is little doubt about the likelihood of increased political violence in NATO nations. Athens is periodically burning, youth unemployment is rising, and the euro crisis is still worsening. NATO members may face new forms and motivations of terrorism generated by the worldwide credit crisis and the eurozone melt down. Counterterrorist calculations will have to allow for the possibility of super-empowered groups, with more sweeping anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic, militantly ecological, or religious agendas, encouraged by the possibilities of using emerging or increasingly widely available technologies in unpredictable synergistic combinations: cyber attacks, shoulder-fired volumetric explosive and antiaircraft weapons, robotic and remote-control technologies, novel chemical and biological agents, nanotechnology, high-energy radio frequency weapons, and so on. How can the Alliance demarcate satisfactory boundaries of responsibility with the EU and its various organs and overseas partners in a way that adequately addresses the potential dimensions of the resultant security problems, but without appearing to overreact?

NATO cannot address the ideological or economic roots of grievances in the same way that national governments, or the EU, or United Nations can attempt to do. But, in the field of Mediterranean security, for example, much will depend upon reducing European protectionism against North African and East Mediterranean products.

Nor can NATO modernize, refocus, or extend national legal codes relating to terrorism or violent activism (a delicate but probably crucial distinction). And it is unlikely to be able to undertake political campaigns aimed at encouraging the re-enhancement of solidarity among citizens or the integration of disaffected communities within national politics as the leaders of constituent governments can.

Naming names of emerging terrorist groups, sympathetic parties, or those states that sponsor or ambiguously tolerate terrorism is also problematic for an alliance that is notoriously leaky and whose members are averse to embarrassment.\(^\text{13}\) Intelligence judgments about putative causes and risks of future terrorism are among the most politically sensitive government issues within liberal democracies. The safe sharing of intelligence information will be a continual background problem and an operational inhibition. Politically, NATO already has difficulties in stating that Russia is a country against whom defensive contingency scenarios should be designed, or that Iranian intentions and military programs might necessitate missile defense or nuclear deterrence.
To what degree will objective horizon scanning be censored in the interests of diplomatic convenience, avoiding threat inflation, the securitization of issue areas, and the “demonization” of groups, communities, movements, diasporas, or regimes? And will NATO be able to find the staff and associated analytical resources to support its desired move from crisis management to continuous civil, military, and social strategic risk assessment of a sufficiently wide range of territories of interest?

The most difficult and disturbing scenarios would involve “hybrid threats,” defined by a NATO report as “those posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.” A range of such possibilities has been identified, such as those threats that operate below NATO’s thresholds for detection or response; use a comprehensive combination of political, military, economic, social, informational, and legal means; or avoid attribution by remaining anonymous. Other hybrid threats include those that work through proxy criminal organizations and nonstate actors, seeking out the legal “gray space” between areas of responsibility, in order to complicate the assignment of responsibilities and impose lengthy delays on interagency cooperation. These actors profit from jurisdictional gaps and regulatory vacuums while rapidly adopting and adapting new technologies.

In the much-reported and highly politically charged field of cyber security, it is not yet clear what collective cyber defense (or even deterrence by denial) would mean beyond an aspiration, even for a uniquely well resourced and cohesive regional organization like NATO. There is, and will remain, only a limited ability to help other states defend against cyber attacks, because it is impossible to predict which new forms of attack will arise, because so much depends upon those states’ network-security preparations, and because nations will be reluctant to share their most effective countermeasures with those who might prove incapable of protecting them. The NATO Cyber Defense Center of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia, is probably the world’s leading embodiment of collective cyber efforts. But it does not pretend to replace national, organizational, or personal responsibility for cyber security. And when it comes to certain kinds of cyber threat, notably advanced persistent threats (APTs), almost no nation seems able to protect itself.

ACKNOWLEDGED NATO STRENGTHS—AND LIMITS

The Alliance’s long-established military and technical expertise in fields like explosive detection, maritime surveillance, command and control, and disaster management certainly means that NATO has relevant, definite, and continuously developing skills to share that could be used against such emerging threats. NATO experts judge that they can provide a strong international forum that brings together various experts from different backgrounds. The Alliance could also provide leadership, mechanisms, or support to help develop multilateral processes, standards, and modus operandi to deal with a number of emerging threat areas. NATO and individual militaries could support comprehensive mentoring, education, and training opportunities where there are security challenges of common interest. But “the great majority of crises involve a very broad spectrum of actors and assets (police, intelligence services, emergency rescue agencies, the private sector, citizens [sic] action groups, Interior Ministries and other international organizations).” The application of these undoubted and expensively acquired capacities may therefore be severely circumscribed by legal, political, intelligence, or commercial sensitivities.

INTERNATIONAL RESENTMENT, SUSPICION, AND GREAT POWER OPPOSITION

It is of course still too early to predict how accommodating the international community will be in the formation of effective rather than nominal partnerships with NATO. But some recurrent problems arising from the international system can be expected.

China, Russia, and Iran seem generally inclined, to varying degrees, to use their different forms of leverage to hold back NATO influence, which they can easily portray as a surrogate for U.S. power for U.S. interests. After the interventions in Kosovo and, especially, Libya, those states can exploit postcolonial fears about NATO drones as twenty-first-century gunboats threatening fragile national autonomies. The recently announced American intention to increase defense
reliance on Special Forces will add to apprehensions that can be multiplied and exploited as well. It would also be reasonable to expect recurrent problems in proving—to frequently skeptical audiences and in the face of deliberate misinformation from state and nonstate actors—that satisfactory boundaries exist between NATO partnerships and the facilitation of the most expensive fantasies of America’s cross-border security agenda. In future contingency planning and crisis decisionmaking, it could become painfully necessary to remember that controversial conventional or counterterrorist operations by NATO members may preclude or undermine entire sets of relationships in the area of emerging security challenges. In this sense, success in partnership building may, paradoxically, create strategic hostages for the Alliance, tending to constrain future choices.

**PARTNERSHIPS: NORMATIVE, SECURE, AND EXCLUSIVE—OR CYNICAL, MERCENARY, AND OPPORTUNISTIC?**

Partnerships are central to the emerging security challenges vision. But with whom should NATO partner? How far should democratic values and concern for human rights be a precondition for working together? An official partnership has been set up with the African Union (AU). The partnership is the AU’s only such link, and one in which NATO is assisting the AU mission in Somalia and providing capacity-building support to its long-term peacekeeping capabilities, in particular the African Standby Force. But to what degree will these considerations allow for close cooperation in the most significant disputed or politically sensitive areas, such as Darfur? Will it prove possible to partner simultaneously with active rivals, such as individual African states, or for example to partner sufficiently satisfactorily with both China and India?

Partnerships driven by shared values and similarly assessed risks may be the ideal, but if they are to be genuine, wholehearted, and capable of preserving secure information, those relationships could also be rare. What may actually be offered is a series of high-sounding declarations or temporary self-interested deals by other actors. The question is how to decide which approaches should be made and what responses should be taken seriously. In the developing world, that may well mean satisfying constant demands for funding—and would certainly require scarce bureaucratic attention. If money and official time can be found, there are still the perennial problems of confidentiality, and severe restrictions in the form of classification protocols, law enforcement data, or proprietary commercial information that regulate information sharing.

NATO itself seems in any case internally politically conflicted over which partnerships it wants to create, or put at risk, in fields like missile defense as a response to WMD proliferation. Direct cooperation and data sharing with Israel, for example, seems technically advantageous but politically problematic. And missile defense in Central Europe is something that the Russian government has for some time loudly proclaimed will threaten the future of any effective NATO partnership with the Russian Federation.

**COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE AND MEASURES OF EFFECTIVENESS**

NATO will have to ask itself—and others will certainly inquire—what its particular advantages are in fields like cyber security, which will not only remain national responsibilities but are arguably also the primary concern of responsible commercial and private Internet users. In areas like WMD proliferation, NATO will have to determine what it can do to add to the current activities intended to uphold the relevant regimes (such as reconsidering and updating national export controls, sharing intelligence, taking enforcement actions against firms supplying illicit products, conducting intelligence-led interdictions, and concerting diplomatic demarches and inducements) which like-minded states already conduct to stem the spread of dangerous weapons technologies and delivery systems. Moreover, states tempted to acquire WMD may be doing so precisely in order to offset the conventional superiority of NATO states. They and their international sympathizers and supporters can consequently be expected to negate, downplay, and vilify the Alliance’s efforts.
More generally, it may be hard to evaluate, or too sensitive to reveal, what NATO’s contribution to overall outcomes in these new fields has actually been. Especially given the Alliance’s decision to more regularly and systematically report on its decisions and achievements, there may be a significant—perhaps impossible—intellectual task in designing some convincing set of measures of effectiveness that can be publicly quoted. This is a general problem for all types of forward-looking preventative intervention. However, the challenge is likely to be greater for a new entrant into a number of fields in which national politicians, specialist ministries, and treasuries already have a strong voice. At least some of those actors are likely to point out that their taxpayers are already contributing to national, EU, and United Nations programs, and demand evidence of the added value that would come from diverting additional funds to what has been an overwhelmingly military alliance for over sixty years.

THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT: STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR “DE-BOUNDED RISKS”

A developing focus on the security implications of diffuse worldwide risks (rather than threats from the antagonistic intentions of specific groups or nations) was already present in the Clinton administration’s 1998 U.S. National Security Strategy, which stated, “Globalization—the process of accelerating economic, technological, cultural and political integration—means that . . . problems that once seemed quite distant . . . have important implications for American security.” 21 As early as 2002, well-connected academics were analyzing the implications of NATO becoming a risk-management instrument. 22 By 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was emphasizing that “the world is interdependent—to be engaged is only modern realpolitik,” 23 a formulation which might serve as a further motto for the emerging security challenges initiative. This trend partly derived from parallel developments in international relations theory and sociology, which stressed “the dark side of globalization” and strengthen the case for NATO’s new attention to emerging security challenges. Yet that same tradition also suggests caution about the difficulty that NATO will face in living up to its announced expectations.

Most of the new security threats identified by NATO represent what the widely influential German academic Ulrich Beck would designate “de-bounded risks,” of which neither the likelihood of occurrence nor severity of outcome can be convincingly calculated. Beck has argued since 1986 when his book Risk Society was first published in German that late-modern Western societies are undergoing a social transformation. 24 That transformation is occurring as the global success of continuing processes of industrialization gives rise to new forms of “unanticipated, temporally and spatially ‘de-bounded’ risks,” 25 that is, “radicalized risk typified by reflexive modernization” in which “industrial technical-scientific projects” produce unintended risks (including climate change and hyper terrorism) that are incalculable, uninsurable, and beyond the control regime of modernity. 26

As advanced industrial states have become more aware of these risks, they have become increasingly anxious and insecure “risk societies.” The emergence of de-bounded risks, often associated with technologies whose potential is not yet fully understood, creates intrinsic problems for modern states and institutions whose promise of competent risk management is essential to their legitimacy and credibility. But there is a structural deficit in the global capacity to organize to respond to new risks and threats. As sociologist Anthony Elliott put it, “The prospects for arresting the dark sides of industrial progress and advanced modernization through reflexivity are routinely short-circuited, according to Beck, by the insidious influence of ‘organized irresponsibility’ . . . a contradiction between an emerging public awareness of risks produced by and within the social-institutional system, on the one hand, and the lack of attribution of systemic risks to this system on the other.” 27

Not only is there no satisfactory way of assigning and enforcing international responsibilities for mitigation, it is exceptionally difficult to prove to overall public satisfaction at any given time that the correct scale of resources and attention is being given to de-bounded risks (climate change is perhaps the paramount example of political controversy). Linkages between national security and risky future potentialities are often uncertain, indirect, delayed, and reliant upon disputable, frequently classified, evidence, emerging methodologies, and the inevitably contending recommendations of different experts. 28
In view of the intellectual and political responses triggered by accelerating globalization, as discussed above, it may be historically unsurprising that NATO is now officially setting itself up to act as a supplementary collective-risk-mitigation instrument for 900 million people. Nevertheless, even though the Alliance will not be claiming the lead in addressing any of the problems it currently lists as new security challenges, it may still not be able to avoid denunciation from different directions for insufficiently determined and under resourced failure or, conversely, paranoid, grandiose, and spendthrift overreaction. The ESCD’s task will also be complicated by the need to avoid suspicions of condescending or hegemonic behavior in its dealings with actors in the developing world. According to some commentators, this is a nearly unavoidable structural problem whenever globalized risks are seen as arising from the absence of functioning liberal governance institutions, and advanced liberal states set out to mitigate conditions within less-developed “zones of risk” in the name of stability. Exceptionally sensitive diplomacy may be required to institutionalize forms of cooperation that are mutually acceptable but still practically effective.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of early 2012, what NATO now designates emerging security challenges are real, serious, and probably growing, but NATO will have special difficulties, as well as some specific advantages, in addressing them and can expect structural problems to arise when attempting to define and prove its “successes” in doing so. The Alliance’s new Emerging Security Challenges Division will benefit from Secretary-General Rasmussen’s (but not necessarily his successors’) special interest in the field, as well as from experienced and evidently talented officials who will undoubtedly energetically attempt to advocate, diagnose, engage, and explain. But much will depend on how willing member governments will be to support the emerging security challenges initiative with resources, patience, and continuing political endorsement given their other priorities. Much will also depend on how much NATO’s organizational culture and priorities can in fact be transformed as the secretary-general intends.

The overall experiment will be worth close observation, though many of the ESCD’s essential achievements will be hidden or impossible to prove. Resultant judgments about effectiveness will thus be debatable and probably politicized. If, however, the emerging security challenges initiative is allowed to fail, then Beck’s theoretical diagnosis of the “organized irresponsibility” of the international order in the face of de-bounded risks and emergent challenges will have been further, depressingly, confirmed.

NOTES


Iklódy 2010.

Ibid.

Shea 2011: 56

Iklódy 2010.


Shea 2011: 55.

In a speech in January 2012 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Norwegian Defense Minister Espen Barth Eide warned that: “Article V is not in such a good shape. . . . the actual ability to deliver if something happens in the trans-Atlantic theater of a more classical type of aggression. . . . Exercises have shown that NATO’s ability to conduct conventional military operations has markedly declined. . . . Not only is NATO’s ability to defend its member states questionable, it might actually deteriorate further as financial pressures in Europe and the U.S. force cuts in military spending.” See: Jorge Benitez, “Norway: NATO losing self defense ability,” NATO Source (blog), Atlantic Council, January 13, 2012, http://www.acus.org/natosource/norway-nato-losing-self-defense-ability.

“In 2008, one of the country’s top national-security officials, Herman Simm, was arrested for treason. He is serving a 12-year prison sentence for spying for Russia, in what is often cited as one of the worst breaches of security in NATO’s history. . . . This new (Estonian) case threatens to be another embarrassment.” Edward Lucas, “Estonian espionage is far from an embarrassment,” European Voice, February 29, 2012, http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/estonian-espionage-is-far-from-an-embarrassment/73733.aspx. See also Edward Lucas, Deception: Spies, Lies and How Russia Dupes the West (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).


“A cybercrime category directed at business and political targets. APTs require a high degree of stealthiness over a prolonged duration of operation in order to be successful. The attack objectives therefore typically extend beyond immediate financial gain, and compromised systems continue to be of service even after key systems have been breached and initial goals reached.” See “Advanced Persistent Threats (APT),” Damballa Labs, http://www.damballa.com/knowledge/advanced-persistent-threats.php.

NATO Allied Command Transformation 2011.

Shea 2011.


NATO Allied Command Transformation 2011.


30 Clapton and Hameiri 2012.

31 Names like Jamie Shea, Diego Ruiz-Palmer, Fred Fredrickson, and Michael Rühle were already familiar to NATO watchers as eloquent, committed, and energetic individuals before the division was formed.

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