

Cleaning up Nato

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Nato is the cornerstone of UK defence policy – we can no longer afford to ignore the democratic deficit at its heart

Earlier this week Nato launched a year-long debate to formulate a new strategic concept to replace the one dating back to 1999. Michael Tomasky asks does Nato still matter? Well, clearly not to the Guardian, which failed to report this event, nor to the political classes, who claim to care about transparency and accountability in public life, but continue to ignore the democratic deficit at the heart of Nato.

Nato matters because, rightly or wrongly, it is the cornerstone of UK defence policy and is the reason why the lives of British soldiers are being "thrown away" in Afghanistan. The default position of most security practitioners is that Nato is a "good thing". For example, the IPPR commission on national security has called for the alliance to be strengthened by reinforcing its European pillar. It also argues that "demonstrating and establishing legitimacy of state action is a strategic imperative", but then feels no compulsion to apply such thinking to Nato reform.

Similarly, David Cameron's plans for constitutional reform draw on three "completely unaccountable" forces at work in Britain: judges, quangos and the EU. But decision-making within Nato remains largely the exclusive preserve of the executive branch of government and an array of inter-governmental bureaucracies. It is the only major intergovernmental body not to have even a basic information disclosure policy, while mechanisms for parliamentary and public accountability and oversight are inadequate or non-existent.

Cameron and others rightly want parliament properly involved "in all big national decisions", and there is no bigger decision than taking the country to war. But parliamentary scrutiny of the decision-making and authority for Nato's intervention in Afghanistan was (and continues to be) seriously flawed. And while Tory spokesmen regularly articulate their unease at the prospect of a hypothetical EU army commanding British soldiers, the reality is that our soldiers are being killed in Nato operations that were not subject to prior parliamentary approval. Nor has there been any requirement for parliament to keep the Afghanistan deployment under review, despite the mission becoming more complex, contentious and expensive – costing the Treasury £2.6bn in 2008 alone.

And Nato is not only concerned with the big picture issues: high-level diplomacy, summits and military campaigns. Most of the alliance's work takes place away from the glare of publicity in an assortment of projects involving over 400 specialised agencies, centres, committees, groups and panels. Why is there no permanent parliamentary committee to monitor these Nato efforts (akin to the European scrutiny committee)? Nato should also be pressed to adopt an information openness policy consistent with the access to information laws already in place in the alliance's 28 member countries, including guidelines for proactive publication of core information, a mechanism by which the public can file requests for information, and an independent review body for hearing appeals against refusals or failures to make information public within a short time-frame.

While Nato claims to be committed to a widespread political debate in framing a new strategic concept, the review is likely to be entrusted to a group of eminent persons (effectively a retread of the Harmel model from the late 1960s). The Guardian and other progressive voices need to be contributing to this "battle of narratives" within the alliance, not least because there is a real opportunity to link Nato reform to the Obama change agenda; to move beyond the failed unilateralism of Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan, and to harness US power in a new "moral, muscular multilateralism". Such an outcome will require Nato to adopt a consultation exercise more appropriate to 21st-century expectations, including mechanisms for public

participation. It also requires national parliaments and media to sharpen their scrutiny of Nato affairs.

Cameron wants to extend the principle of transparency to "every nook and cranny of politics and public life", while the IPPR commission called for a commitment to more democratic and transparent national security policymaking "open to a wide array of inputs and subject to effective public scrutiny and accountability". Nowhere are these commitments more urgently needed than in the process of updating Nato's strategic concept.

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