

The Case for Giving NATO an American Secretary General (Revisited)

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In an opinion piece published fifteen years ago, I made the case for a major innovation in NATO's personnel policy by inverting the tradition of always holding a European Secretary General and an American Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR). This idea was not revolutionary in itself. In fact, it was first put forward a quarter of a century ago by Henry Kissinger at a time when the "evil empire" was still central to NATO's *raison d'être*. A few years after the end of the Cold War, the moment seemed opportune enough for me to bring Kissinger's proposal back into the fold. Thus, in my article I argued for a reversal of NATO's leadership structure because the strategic balance of the international system had changed so profoundly and yet the Alliance's traditional leadership tandem continued to reflect the archaic politico-military realities of the Cold War.

The way in which the world changed since then has only reinforced my point. Since the 1990s, America has become less and less willing (and capable) of taking the lead in European security, nor is it expected to assume such a role anymore. Events since 9/11 emphasized this trend. Of course, during the Cold War, it seemed strategically sensible to have an American serve in NATO's top military position and a European secretary general was therefore a natural compromise.

Yet twenty years since the end of the Cold War and just a few weeks away from celebrating its 60th Anniversary, NATO's leadership has still not adapted to a new strategic reality. Admittedly, NATO did, in fact, welcome more (European) member-states and Europe assumed a greater share of assuring its own security, much to America's satisfaction. Thus, America has reduced its military presence on the European continent but this does not indicate a waning political interest for the organization. As I argued before, appointing an American as Secretary General and a European as Supreme Commander would give symbolic weight to the changed U.S. and European roles in the world and highlight the flexibility and continued relevance of NATO in the twenty-first century.

There are ten reasons why reform of NATO's leadership would be good for the revitalisation of the Alliance. To begin, such a change would accurately reflect the strategic shift away from the Cold War era, during which Europe relied primarily upon the U.S. for its own security. While the capabilities gap certainly still exists today, there is a greater effort, at least from the bigger European states to narrow that gap and carve a greater European role in international security affairs. Second, this change would also be more representative of NATO's membership, bearing in mind that Europe is represented by 24 of the Alliance's 26 member-states. Third, a European Supreme Commander would send the message to the U.S. and others that Europe is now serious about handling its share of the regional and global security burden. It would also serve to stifle the European critics who see NATO as being over-saturated with American influence. Fourth, it could also provide the right impetus to boost European commitment to the Atlantic Alliance and global defence responsibilities in a time of dire need. Furthermore, Washington has never been so crystal-clear about its desire for Europe to carry its share of the security burden not just in Europe but in out-of-area operations as well. Fifth, a European SACEUR would soften or eliminate any remaining European reluctance of a more global role for NATO. Sixth, it would allow NATO to be seen by EU-philes as less of an obstacle to European defence integration and would remove a largely symbolic division between NATO's Atlantic vocation and ESDP. Seventh, it would also coincide nicely

role for NATO. Sixth, it would allow NATO to be seen by EU-philes as less of an obstacle to European defence integration and would remove a largely symbolic division between NATO's Atlantic vocation and ESDP. Seventh, it would also coincide nicely with France's full return to NATO's integrated command structures. Eighth, an American NATO Secretary General would improve the alliance's political credibility in Washington and discourage U.S. temptations of unilateralism or isolationism. Ninth, the appointment of an American Secretary General would be perceived as a more credible global spokesman for the Alliance and one who could contribute to a better understanding in Europe of issues of direct significance to the security of the Western Hemisphere. And finally, the time for action is now or never, especially since failure to reform at this crucial stage could jeopardize NATO's future strategic relevance and institutional reformability.

Of course, such a proposal is not without its challenges. The principal problem resides in tackling path-dependency, or the comfort that lies in perpetuating past patterns of leadership. Too much change, especially of such visible nature, can be unsettling to institutional dinosaurs. It is also a question of entrenched national interests. The second problem involves convincing Washington to relinquish American command of the coveted SACEUR post in exchange for an American Secretary General. However, this quid pro quo exchange, vital in adapting NATO to new strategic realities, could nevertheless gain traction among member-states, and the Alliance's 60th Anniversary in Strasbourg and Kehl marks a perfect (and perhaps final) opportunity to modernize the leadership structure of this Cold War creature.