When the secretaries-general of NATO and the United Nations, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and Ban Ki Moon, signed a joint declaration in September 2008, it came as a surprise to many observers. After almost 60 years of wary coexistence, the two organisations established, for the first time, a formal relationship between the headquarters and a framework for expanded consultation and cooperation. The organisations already cooperate to safeguard Kosovo’s fragile stability and to manage a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, and NATO has until recently protected UN food-aid shipments to Somalia against the growing threat of pirate attacks. The UN is involved in virtually all ongoing NATO operations in one way or another, but relations have always been troubled.¹ The Alliance is still seen by many UN members and parts of the UN bureaucracy as a Cold War military machine and US ‘toolbox’. Given the tensions between the two, even UN staff wonder why Ban decided to sign the declaration. Put into a broader strategic perspective, however, the joint declaration fits within the trend towards a stronger role for regional actors in global security.

The agreement offers the opportunity for substantial strategic dialogue, which could make fragmented UN–NATO efforts to stabilise and rebuild war-torn countries such as Afghanistan more coherent. Given the difficult history of relations between the two, however, closer UN–NATO cooperation is likely to face continuing challenges.

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Regional organisations and security

When the UN founders met in San Francisco in 1945, they expected that ‘regional arrangements’ would play a significant part in a new system of collective security. Chapter VIII of the UN Charter encourages the settlement of local disputes by regional organisations, and the UN Security Council can use regional organisations for enforcement action under its authority. With the beginning of the Cold War, however, the role of regional organisations could not develop as anticipated.

*De jure*, the Security Council is the only body with the authority to legitimise the use of force in international relations. The only exception is provided by Article 51 of the UN Charter, which sets out the right of individual or collective self-defence. In reality, the UN’s lack of resources and military capabilities impede its ability to enforce its decisions, and its authority is frequently ignored. NATO’s very creation in April 1949 as an alliance for collective defence demonstrated that Western Europe had serious doubts about the UN’s ability to fulfil its promise of collective security. The North Atlantic Treaty does not mention Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. As a Chapter VIII organisation, NATO would have been constrained to take military action only after Security Council authorisation. This would have given permanent Security Council members Russia and China the power to veto an Alliance decision. The drafters of the Treaty chose to rely instead on Article 51, which obliges the Alliance simply to report to the Security Council after collective self-defence measures have been taken.

NATO and the Warsaw Pact quickly earned reputations as vehicles for superpower interests, marginalising the UN. Other regional organisations were seen as ineffective debating chambers, lacking the necessary capacities for resolving crises. As a result, Security Council resolutions made no reference to regional organisations throughout the Cold War.

A new beginning

Since 1991, the UN has made ever more frequent references to regional organisations. While critics warn that such organisations pursue the particular interests of their member states and lack the neutrality and impartiality necessary to resolve conflicts, supporters argue that regional organisations...
enjoy comparative advantages in crisis management, such as geographical proximity and understanding of the actors and issues involved.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali expressed a central rationale for the trend toward regional management of conflicts in 1995: ‘It is increasingly apparent that the United Nations cannot address every potential and actual conflict troubling the world.’ UN peacekeeping has evolved from the Cold War practice of deploying unarmed or lightly armed forces to supervise ceasefires in permissive environments to the current large-scale, multidimensional peace-building missions under challenging conditions. One way to relieve the increased pressure is to delegate tasks to regional actors. The European Union (EU), for instance, has led several UN-mandated crisis-management missions, and is the most important financial contributor to UN peacekeeping.

Regional organisations have various motives for cooperating with the UN. For the EU, the UN is the cornerstone of a multilateral world order, and a viable option for tackling conflicts in places where EU members would prefer not to send their troops. NATO is interested in UN mandates for its missions, which provide legitimacy for the use of force and increase domestic and international support for operations.

In 1992, in Bosnia, NATO became the first regional organisation authorised by the Security Council to use force, but the overall record of UN–NATO cooperation has been mixed. NATO has complained of UN ineffectiveness, and the UN has been angered by NATO’s willingness to initiate military action without authorisation. Cooperation in Bosnia and Kosovo has functioned well, although both sides face persistent problems with information- and intelligence-sharing. Institutional collaboration has been limited to a single military liaison officer (with no civilian staff) and ad hoc desk-to-desk contacts. The EU, by comparison, has two fully staffed delegations in New York, one representing the Council of the European Union and the other the EU Commission.
Since 2004, however, there have been growing signs that the UN is ready to take relations with regional organisations to a new level. Both the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and Kofi Annan’s March 2005 report ‘In Larger Freedom’ advocated closer links with regional bodies. The September 2005 UN World Summit called for expanded ‘consultation and cooperation between the United Nations and regional … organizations through formalized agreements between the respective secretariats’.

The long road to a joint declaration

It was at the 2005 summit that NATO first proposed a draft joint declaration. The UN secretary-general’s authority to sign joint declarations without further consultation of the member states made it possible to avoid a vote in the UN General Assembly, where NATO critics dominate. Nevertheless, the project encountered severe obstacles.

NATO faces enduring negative perceptions in the UN, where it is often linked to US global military ambition and viewed as being at odds with the UN mission of maintaining international peace. For many in the UN, it was therefore symbolically important that an agreement with NATO take place only after accords with other regional organisations such as the EU, the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Most importantly, many UN members and staff are afraid that a stronger reliance on NATO assets could reduce UN decision-making autonomy and operational independence. The main troop-contributing countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nigeria are especially concerned about possible NATO influence on UN command-and-control structures. The UN’s humanitarian bodies and agencies have also been critical of the declaration, fearing that closer cooperation with NATO could jeopardise their neutrality and impartiality in conflict areas and put their staff at risk.

When Ban Ki Moon came into office in January 2007, he continued his predecessor’s policy of forging stronger links to regional organisations, but was not keen to tackle the sensitive issue of NATO–UN relations, giving priority to other partnerships instead. In November 2006, outgoing
Secretary-General Annan had signed a declaration for enhancing cooperation with the AU, which was followed by a joint communiqué of the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council in June 2007. That same year, a joint statement on UN–EU cooperation in crisis management and a memorandum of understanding with ASEAN were signed.

An updated NATO declaration was ready to sign by early 2008, but the UN again put it off, first arguing that it wanted to wait for a report on UN personnel safety, then that it was preoccupied with the humanitarian crisis in Burma. Another failure seemed likely, as tensions between the UN and NATO rose during the summer over UN criticism of the international forces in Afghanistan for causing too many civilian casualties and over the Georgia crisis.

NATO members, which are also important UN members, continued to push the issue of the declaration, pressuring the UN secretary-general. The UN secretariat had to weigh the risks and benefits of its decision. On the one hand, the UN’s main troop contributors were against the declaration, and important members such as Russia, China, Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa had voiced concerns. On the other, NATO’s potential to provide desperately needed strategic-airlift and naval capabilities in Africa seemed to outweigh the risks. On 23 September 2008, Ban and de Hoop Scheffer finally signed the declaration in the offices of the UN Secretary General.

The signature has left the UN uneasy. In an effort not to upset the non-Western Security Council members further, the UN secretariat urged NATO not to publish the accord, and ordered its staff to keep the issue as low-key as possible. The ‘quiet signing’ nevertheless caused a public outcry in Russia. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Ban Ki Moon of ‘secretly’ concluding an agreement without properly consulting Security Council members. Russia’s ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, even called the declaration ‘illegal’. The NATO and UN secretariats argue, however, that they held sufficient briefings and that a joint declaration of the secretaries-general does not require approval from UN members.7

Considering that it took three years to agree on a text, the result is not very remarkable. The two-page document acknowledges the organisations’ past operational cooperation, and the secretaries-general declare their intention
to establish a framework for consultation and cooperation, including regular exchanges at senior and working levels. It then lists areas of common interest in which cooperation should be further developed: communication and information-sharing, including issues pertaining to the protection of civilians; capacity-building, training and exercises; lessons learned; planning and support for contingencies; and operational coordination and support.

Although NATO Spokesman James Appathurai was quick to emphasise that there were ‘no politics attached to this’, the main value of the agreement, which lacks any technical details, is political. NATO hopes that it will now be easier to improve its relations with non-governmental and other regional organisations, such as the AU and the League of Arab States. Most importantly, the document sends a clear message from the top to the organisations’ bureaucracies that cooperation and coordination are desirable and necessary – something that has not always been clear in the past.

**A stronger role for regional organisations?**

Despite its remarkable transformation since the end of the Cold War, NATO has essentially remained a military organisation. In peace-building operations, such as the one in Afghanistan, success depends on the capacities and expertise of the UN and its special agencies in such areas as institution-building, rule of law, humanitarian assistance and development. If progress lacks in these fields, the Alliance will not be able to achieve its goals. The UN, in turn, has a growing need for the Alliance’s capabilities for peacekeeping operations. It faces increasingly complex missions in sometimes hostile environments, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Afghanistan, which require robust forces, air and sea transport, and aerial-reconnaissance capabilities.

Given the complexity of the current operational environment, the world’s security architecture is under stress. A complete remodelling of the system is, however, unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future, and international organisations will have to find ways to create synergy and intensify coordination. The signature of a joint declaration between NATO and the UN has the potential to improve institutional relations, but operational cooperation is likely to remain limited. NATO members are hardly able or willing to
provide capabilities for UN peacekeeping in regions which they perceive to be of minor strategic interest. The UN, for its part, potentially possesses the authority and legitimacy to become the actor that coordinates efforts in stabilisation operations. Afghanistan is in particularly desperate need of coordinated political, security and reconstruction activities, and NATO is not suited to fulfil this task. If NATO members accepted a stronger UN coordination role, this would end a situation in which all actors call for coordination, but nobody wants to be coordinated.

Closer ties between the organisations could also result in common planning for responses to humanitarian crises and natural disasters like the devastating earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, where both sides worked together to provide relief. Making progress in these fields will be difficult, as each body will have to give up some of its operational and decision-making autonomy. In the long run, however, scarce resources, pressing security challenges, and determined political leadership could lead to more effective cooperation in some of the most troubled regions of the world.

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Notes


