



SMALL WARS

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Lord Ismay, Restated

By *[Octavian Manea](#)*

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The first NATO Secretary General, **Lord Ismay**, stated the organization's goal was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down".

A series of rephrasings of this famous quote follows:

The purpose of NATO is to keep the West in, the Russians out, and the isolationists (especially in Europe) down. (John Hulsman, HCSS)

Today; NATO's purpose is to keep the Americans in charge, the Europeans compliant, and the Brussels bureaucracy busy. (Stephen Walt, Harvard University)

The purpose of NATO is to attract the Russians Westward away from reactionary Slavophile tendencies; to keep the Americans in by helping them to manage the global challenges that they share with Europe; and to provide the security blanket that allows Germany and others to continue the integration that has made Europe an island of peace." (Joseph Nye, Harvard University)

To keep America engaged, the French inside, and Europe together. (Michael Cox, LSE)

NATO's purpose has become one locking in the security and durability of the West while bringing Russia in from the cold. (Charles Kupchan, Georgetown University)

NATO's present function is to keep the European Union weak, European welfare states strong, and the U.S. defense budget large. (Barry Posen, MIT)

NATO's purpose has become one of sustaining pretense. Thanks to NATO, the Americans pretend to have allies, Europe pretends to contribute to global security, and the Russians pretend to have an external enemy. (Andrew Bacevich, Boston University)

Today, NATO's purpose is to keep the Americans engaged, Europe in the lead, and Russia as a constructive partner. (Sean Kay, Ohio State University)

Keep the U.S. in, Mullah Omar out, Germany engaged, and Russia on a leash. (Daniel Korski, ECFR)

The purpose of NATO is to maintain the habit of close security and military co-operation between the U.S. and its European allies, to defend the member-states' territory and populations, and to build a more secure Europe by deterring aggressors, facilitating transition of authoritarian societies to democracy, and intervening against the worst violators of human rights. This may sound old-fashioned: where does the rise of China fit in? What about a more assertive Russia? I am not ignoring them -- I just think that some values and principles remain the same, and should remain the same, even if the rise of new actors limits NATO's options and forces it to return to its more regional roots." (Tomas Valasek, CER)

NATO's mission in the 21st century should be little different to that which it has always been: to unify the

geographically vulnerable European peninsula with powers across the Atlantic to address the geopolitical threat of the ages: a Eurasian power gaining control of so much of the world's mega-continent as to be virtually insurmountable. He who controls Eurasia can control the world. NATO must engage in Eurasia to remain relevant." (Alexandros Petersen, Atlantic Council)

Keep the Americans engaged, keep the Germans (and all others) integrated and responsible, make Russia cooperative -- and have all contribute jointly to conflict prevention and crisis management beyond NATO's perimeter. (General Klaus Wittmann)

I would argue that the most significant and interesting aspect of NATO's role today is keeping the Europeans in. Many in the United States are concerned that, without an immediate threat as was posed by the USSR, our friends in Europe will allow their military capabilities to wither on the vine. NATO's contributions to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan are important, but most European populations appear ready to pull out and leave it to the Americans. NATO, it turns out, has been an important mechanism to ensure that our European allies remain committed to security operations in Afghanistan. The trick going forward will be translating that commitment to gain European participation in stability operations in failed and near-failing states around the world. This is where the third element -- keeping Al-Qaeda down -- comes into play. The attacks of September 2001 and July 2002 demonstrated that we cannot rely on defense, but must work to deny terrorist organizations the footholds and disgruntled populations they rely upon. Stability operations and engagement should be a major element of NATO's future *raison d'être*, due to the link between security within NATO and preventing terrorist organizations from gaining a stronghold in failed and failing states". (Abraham Denmark, CNAS)

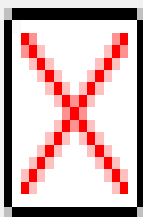
NATO's prime mission today should be twofold: 1. To keep Europe at peace. War is now unthinkable in Western Europe. NATO should aim to keep things this way. 2. To keep WMD terror at bay. WMD terror is now the greatest threat to the security of all NATO states. NATO should therefore have to dual mission of limiting WMD spread and defeating those terror networks that aspire to mass killing in the West. Keeping Germany down and Russia out are obsolete missions. They are self-executing. Keeping the U.S. in? Well, maybe. To keep the US in--in Europe, in the world, and in a sane place. When American's don't engage with allies they tend to go around the bend and start acting out. U.S. engagement with NATO has a constructively calming effect on the U.S. (Stephen Van Evera, MIT)

Lord Ismay's celebrated dictum, both pithy and accurate, cannot be updated for the times. Why? Because NATO, no matter what the NATO cheerleading squad proclaims, is an alliance in the wilderness: it has no compelling purpose. Even the evidence that NATO's many champions offer as proof of its success demonstrates this proposition. Consider three common explanations: 1) NATO has expanded to include many more members; ergo, it's thriving. So it has. But the expansion has increased its incoherence and disunity, as witness the divisions created by the Iraq war and the minority-do-the-heavy lifting mentality of the majority in Afghanistan. 2) NATO has transcended Europe and now has extra-European missions. Fine, but just what are these missions and why would the alliance choose as its continued reason for being the very issue (out of area operations) that has traditionally made for the most acrimony in its ranks? In Iraq, key NATO members opposed the war; in Afghanistan, the burdens of fighting are borne by a handful of members, some of who are leaving, or are indicating that they will because of collapsing public support at home for a mission that is becoming more dangerous and, despite the Obama administrations reassurances to the contrary, open-ended. 3) NATO, is not just an alliance, it's also a political club. This is pure pabulum (though it sounds nice), but let's pursue its claim for a moment anyway. If NATO is a political community, what values bind it and for what concrete ends. If there are certain common values, democracy say, what is the logic of restricting its membership to Europe? Beyond a point, the claim that NATO is not principally a military alliances makes no sense, either in light of its Charter or its history.

The broadening of its purposes by invoking political platitudes amounts to saying it can't meet any of the tests that make for an effective alliance. In the end, each of these three rationales is lame. An alliance that once served an important goal now is adrift. It may endure, hold large meetings, issue reports, and release high-minded communiqués, but it is fast becoming a shell. (Rajan Menon, City University of New York, City College of New York)

NATO was designed for a multi-polar world, but not one where it itself represents two of those poles. Back when Lord Ismay's unofficial motto held -- that NATO's purpose was to "keep the Americans in, Russians out, and Germans down" -- America presided over a unified Western world in which Europe was a junior partner. Today there remains a transatlantic alliance, but within the NATO context it appears more a dalliance. European members have a different vision, distinct priorities, and their own modus operandi from the U.S. At his retirement ceremony in late July, former commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan General Stanley A. McChrystal joked that he hoped to convince Italy to send more troops by pointing out how many pairs of Gucci shoes his wife owns. Current SACEUR James Stavridis frequently pops up on Twitter and other social media as part of a campaign to remind Europeans of NATO's relevance, consistently offering a heavy dose of bromides about common heritage, shared goals, and the need for an agile and flexible NATO in the face of emerging threats. But like the U.S. foreign policy establishment, NATO is searching for a new grand strategy every administration instead of every generation. NATO is clearly attempting to globalize itself through its massive out-of-area occupation in Afghanistan, and relationships with India, Japan and Australia. But NATO's true legacy will not be its own expansion, but the replication of its regional security model. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and many East Asian countries hope to emulate NATO's success in creating security clubs to manage their own affairs and bring about regional peace and stability such as Europe now enjoys. Neither the U.S. nor NATO are having any luck socializing revisionist rising powers to follow their lead, but in time they may witness ever more regions copying their model. The result may well be multiple NATOs for a multi-polar world. (Parag Khanna, New America Foundation)

About the Author



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