



February 3, 2002

## The End of NATO?

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

**F**lying in and out of Afghanistan is a harrowing business. When I tried to get out of Kabul a few weeks ago, bad weather closed Bagram airbase and the U.N. canceled its flight, so my only way out was to hitchhike on a U.S. military transport. The trip turned out to be a real insight.

For security reasons, the U.S. military flies all its transports in and out of Afghanistan at night. In this case, the runway lights were kept off until just before the C-130, guided by infrared sensors and radar, dipped below the low clouds and hit the tarmac.

As soon as it cut its engines, U.S. soldiers, wearing special night-vision goggles that made them look like bug-eyed Martians, unloaded and then reloaded the plane entirely in the dark. It then took off completely in the dark, save for a few seconds of runway lights to guide it out. There is only one air force in the world that can operate so effectively in the pitch dark this way, using night-vision equipment: the U.S. Air Force.

It's a great thing — and it's destroying the NATO alliance.

Yes, you read that right. Visiting Brussels after Kabul, I found only one issue dominating the buzz at NATO headquarters, and it was this: The U.S. has become so much more technologically advanced than any of its NATO allies that America increasingly doesn't need them to fight a distant war, as it demonstrated in Afghanistan, where it basically won alone, except for small but important contributions from Britain, Canada and Australia. And when you add to that the unilateralist impulses of the Bush team — which instinctively doesn't want to fight with aid from allies who might get in the way or limit America's room for maneuvers — you have many, many people in Brussels asking whether NATO nations can ever fight together again.

"In the 1960's it was France under Charles DeGaulle that threatened NATO's cohesion — in 2001, it is Don Rumsfeld's America that is doing so," argued Dominique Moisi, the French expert on international relations. "Basically the question before us is this: What happens to a creature when its creator no longer trusts it? What is the meaning of an alliance if the immediate reaction of its leader is, 'Don't call us, we'll call you, because we basically don't trust you.' Look, I am all for NATO, but if the Americans are not, what am I to do?"

As Afghanistan and Kosovo showed, to fight a modern war today you need four key assets: many large transport aircraft to deploy troops to far-flung battlefields; precision-guided bombs and missiles that can hit enemy targets with a high degree of certitude, thereby shortening the war and reducing civilian casualties; large numbers of Special Operations teams that can operate at night using night-vision equipment; and secure, encrypted communications so ground and air units can be knit together in a high-tech war without the enemy listening in.

No other NATO country has all four of these. Britain comes closest. Germany, France and Italy are barely in the ballgame, and the others are a joke.

In part this is because European defense industries are not as sophisticated as America's today. But in part it's because the Europeans, deep down, don't feel threatened by America's enemies, particularly by the "axis of evil" (Iran, Iraq and North Korea) that Mr. Bush identified. Therefore, they don't want to spend much on defense. If President Bush gets the defense budget increase he asked for in his State of the Union address, U.S. defense spending will equal the defense budgets of the next 15 highest countries — combined.

As a result, we are increasingly headed for a military apartheid within NATO: America will be the chef who decides the menu and cooks all the great meals, and the NATO allies will be the busboys who stay around

and clean up the mess and keep the peace — indefinitely. As one French diplomat put it to me bluntly, "That is not going to be sustainable."

He's right. Brussels, we have a problem.

But if the Europeans truly want to be in on the takeoff of military operations, they had better invest in the planes and equipment that can take off with us — including in total dark. Otherwise they will have no credibility when they complain about U.S. unilateralism. At the same time, though, the Bush team would do well to restrain some of its unilateralist instincts, from NATO to Kyoto, to make clear that we don't intend to fly solo everywhere and we want others in on the landing.

Because, frankly, I'm glad America can fight everywhere in the dark, but I wouldn't want it to have to fight everywhere alone.

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