The future of NATO is again on top of the political agenda. The Ukraine crisis and the
annexation of Crimea have brought the issue of NATO’s mission and its capabilities
to the forefront. The crisis is deep and has triggered significant changes in NATO’s
planning and strategies. The current book pretends to address some of the future
challenges of NATO. Unfortunately, the book does not deliver on its promise and
fails to address some of the fundamental challenges as we see them in 2015.

In fact, the book reminds us of the difficulties involved in planning for the future. And the book also reminds us of how rapidly the discussion about NATO can change. At the time of writing the book, the situation was very different. In 2013 NATO was preparing to end its long term out of area mission in Afghanistan, the European economic crisis led to rapid cuts in military spending and voters preferred welfare rather than defence. Across the Atlantic the US was pivoting to Asia, and at the same
time demanding a more balanced sharing of the burden. The political and security
situation in the Eastern European neighbourhood was also more stable. However, we saw signs that the transitions in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) was turning and we could observe growing instabilities in the south.

This does not mean that the book is completely outdated and does not deserve a
readership. In fact, the book provides good coverage of some of the enduring themes and
developments critical for determining the future of NATO, and it also provides
valuable insights –both for scholars and practitioners – into the lessons NATO could
draw from the Afghanistan adventure.

The different chapters cover a range of interesting and important aspects of
NATO post the Afghanistan operation, such as the US approach to NATO (Svein
Melby), the role of Russia for the Alliance (Derek Averre), the issue of burden
sharing (Janne H. Matlary), the debate on extended deterrence (Helga Haftendorn),
a critical analysis of the comprehensive approach (Sten Rynning), the development
of NATO’s command structures (Pål Sigurd Hilde), as well as the role of NATO’s
Response Force (NFR) (Jens Ringsmose). Still, as often is the case with edited
volumes, the book lacks theoretical and methodological coherence, which the editors
acknowledge is not their main ambition. There is no common research question or
hypothesis that the different chapters relate to and all this makes the result a bit too fragmented. Instead, they aim at providing “a comprehensive and structured analysis of NATO’s adaptation [to new] realities” (p. 3). Unfortunately, here too there are weaknesses. It is true that the book provides a more comprehensive overview of the challenges that NATO faces than most of the existing literature. And the editors are right in arguing that most of the literature on NATO is focusing on more specific issues, such as the US or (other allies’) policies towards the alliance, the partnerships policies, or specific operations (Balkans, ISAF, Libya) and the like. Still, one may question whether this book actually fulfils its own ambition of comprehensiveness. While the editors explicitly claim to provide a broad perspective on NATO that is more ‘hands on’ and thus more relevant than the existing literature, one might argue that they put too much emphasis on the importance of the experiences and lessons learnt from the operations in Afghanistan. While this was on everybody’s mind in 2013, this is no longer the case in 2015. The fact that a book on the future of NATO, published in 2014, lacks a discussion about the changing relationship between NATO and Russia, is striking.

The introduction, written by Andrew A. Michta, provides an interesting overview of the main challenges that NATO is facing post-ISAF and the Afghan endeavour. However, in contrast to Michta, I am somewhat more doubtful if this operation could be presented as a success – even if it is just in military terms. In spite of this, the introduction sets the scene by presenting the overall security policy context and the main aim of the book.

While the introduction also gives a good overview of the main challenges NATO is facing, the main weakness is still that the current crises in Ukraine and between Russia and the West are barely mentioned. It is of course impossible to include all recent events in such a book, but the crisis in Ukraine is not just another event – it has in fact changed European security and is likely to have an impact on the future of NATO – perhaps more so than the experiences in Afghanistan.

Thus, a more accurate title for this book would perhaps have been ‘NATO after ISAF’ or ‘lessons learnt from the Afghan operation’. Then, there would be a better fit between the title and the content. While the role of Russia is covered in the chapter by Derek Averre, it lacks an analysis of the more recent events (since December 2013). In the conclusion, Michta discusses the Ukraine crisis, but it should have been an important theme throughout the whole book – especially since the book claims to be comprehensive.

In spite of this main weakness, the book discusses many important aspects that all have changed the purpose of the alliance. For instance, it is true, as Michta argues that the regional and global security context has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, the terrorist attack against the US in 2003 and its launch of a ‘global war on terror’ that subsequently led to the ISAF operation in Afghanistan and, finally (I would have added) the Ukraine crisis, which has also led to a deep crisis in the relationship between Russia and the West. His main argument, that the principal challenge for NATO is to find the right balance between ‘in-area missions’ versus ‘out of area engagement’ in order to be an effective and relevant security organisation for its allies, is also still valid. In fact, this is even more evident after the Ukraine crisis when the security and defence policies of many of the allies have increased their focus on territorial defence, which was seen, by some, as outdated a few years back.
But there is also another issue that is relevant for the effectiveness of NATO, and that is how to handle the economic crisis and the decreasing defence budget. This is of course an underlying theme in this volume, but it would have been interesting to have a chapter on the value of smart defence or pooling and sharing in this context. In a book about the future of NATO, it would have been natural to discuss the value of regional and sub-regional defence cooperation and the extent to which such initiatives (Nordefco, Visegrad 4, the French British agreements etc.) could be seen as a way of overcoming the problem with a decreasing defence budget and make the Alliance more effective in the future.

The editor points out that one of the main challenges is that there are different visions of NATO and that there is a need to find a new consensus. In the introduction, Michta argues that the alliance today “contains ‘three NATO’s of sorts’”, defined by the relative power, threat perceptions, and preferences of the member-states: (1) the US vision of NATO as an expeditionary alliance, (2) the Western European allies who share a more regional focus; and (3) the willingness to buy into US NATO-policy to ensure reciprocity in the event of a crisis (Norway and Central European allies) (p. 5). While these different approaches certainly exist, the recent events in Ukraine, the aggressive Russian approach and anti-Western discourse, might, in the end, produce more unity in the alliance after all.

Whereas the volume discusses, at length, the experience and lessons learnt from Afghanistan and the ISAF operation, it treats the issue of Russia just as one among many challenges that the Alliance is facing. While this is understandable given that the manuscript was probably written before these recent events, it is still unfortunate because it makes parts of the discussion less relevant. Is it the lessons learnt from Afghanistan that will be defining for how NATO develops in the years to come or is it rather the recent events in Ukraine, the instability in the Southern neighbourhood and the increasing threat of terrorism?

I would argue that if the authors were to write the book again today, the focus would have been slightly different. This is not to say the lessons learnt from Afghanistan will not be important, but when the aim is to provide “a comprehensive and structured analysis of NATO’s adaptation [to new] realities” (p. 3), this becomes a bit too narrow. It is of course challenging to write about a ‘moving target’ and one might be surprised by events. But on the other hand, the development towards a more authoritarian regime in Russia with a more anti-Western discourse as well as the instability in the South has been visible for some time now. The Russo-Georgian war was a first incident and the Arab Spring and the Russo-Ukraine conflict as well as the rise of IS in the South have all been a real wake-up call both for NATO and the West as such.

Michta also argues that there is a need to find a new consensus. And this is probably the case. But the different allies are likely to continue to have different priorities – the US will continue to have global interests and a pivot to Asia, and the European allies will continue to have a more regional approach – either they will give priority (like Northern and Central European allies) to the challenges in the East or (like Southern European allies) to the challenges coming from the MENA region. Still, they all agree that it is crucial to fight international terrorism and to have a peaceful relationship with Russia. It is in this context that NATO has to find its new role and less by focusing exclusively on the experience from Afghanistan.