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20 years on: Manfred Wörner's impact as NATO Secretary General



North Atlantic Council at 28, Brussels, December 2013

The job of serving as NATO's Secretary General has never been easy. But perhaps it has never been more complicated than today. With 28 allies, a host of partner states, and a strategic agenda that includes counter-terrorism, cyber-security, missile defence, among a range of other security challenges, leading the Alliance today is a formidable task.

Indeed, the current Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, has embraced this environment. In the process, he has introduced new ways of governing this military and political organisation.

Rasmussen has brought about novel ideas, strategies and diplomatic methods to deal with the complexities of leading NATO during his years at the helm.

Yet Rasmussen's leadership must be placed in the context of the immediate years after the Cold War, and especially of one of his predecessors: Manfred Wörner. He was the first and only German to have served as NATO Secretary General, from 1988 until his death in 1994. This summer marks the 20th anniversary of his passing.

Wörner remains the only Secretary General to have died in office, which no doubt adds to his legacy. Yet it was his manner of leadership, both in substance and in style, which so profoundly shaped his legacy and NATO's transformation into a modern alliance.

During much of the Cold War period, the office of NATO's Secretary General was occupied by talented diplomats, who often did exceptional work in fostering consensus. Yet in these years, the Alliance's mandate was far more conservative, which often led to conservative leaders who sought not to rock the boat, but rather to remain on the same course.

Wörner saw the office differently - as a forum for advancing policy change. While recognising that his main job was to produce consensus among the Allies, at the same time he was anything but a simple "secretary," there to mend diplomatic differences and keep the peace. Wörner was a secretary general who would challenge, cajole, and at times berate an ally to adapt to new strategic conditions. Indeed, given how he envisioned his leadership role, Wörner was at the forefront of many difficult issues facing the Alliance during his tenure.

Wörner helped guide the process of shaping the 1991 Rome Summit decision, which introduced revolutionary ideas in the Alliance's mission to include peacekeeping, conflict prevention and crisis diplomacy.

Wörner also expressly reached out to the Soviet Union and later Russia, all in an effort to cultivate an improved diplomatic relationship.

On his own timetable, he also came to accept and then lobby for membership expansion to Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps most notable was his intense desire to see war end in the Balkans. This culminated in his memorable visit to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in April 1994, while he was dying from cancer. With his illness eating his body away and his physician at his side, Wörner went to the NAC to plead for the Allies to demonstrate military resolve to prevent more suffering. In the end, Wörner got what he desired, as NATO agreed to face the crisis.



Manfred Wörner in Moscow in 1991

Across all major issues in NATO's transformation, Wörner was at the centre of change. But beyond his policy contributions, Wörner had a number of personal skills that served him well. Wörner was a student of foreign languages and made efforts to utilise these skills to achieve consensus. He also garnered wide respect for his ability to think strategically. In this regard, he could think broadly about future policy directions that he felt the Allies should consider.

Wörner also brought passion to the office. In his capacity as "general," Wörner was not afraid to place direct pressure on the Allies to reform, take action, and to use force as necessary. As then Assistant Secretary General of NATO Robin Beard noted, Wörner was "a statesman who could express anger." His presence was no doubt aided by his "booming" voice, which was impossible to ignore.

Wörner demonstrated that NATO's Secretary General is there to lead—especially during moments of crisis—as many of his successors have similarly done. Such leadership from this office can be the key ingredient for diplomatic progress and Alliance transformation.

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Manfred Wörner in Brussels in 1994

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