Interoperability—The Glue of Coalition Warfare

"Interoperability" has been a term known in the U.S. Army certainly since the Korean War when it was applied to activities of a dozen national contingents which were shaped, coordinated and directed to the objectives of that conflict. World War II demanded that the forces of many nations operate cooperatively, and that those of one nation be willing and able to fight under a commander of another.

The need for interoperability in NATO is obvious—16 nations, 15 with military forces, pledged to the proposition that an attack on one is an attack on all, must believe that their forces can operate collectively, effectively. They must believe that their military leaders have developed the policies, engaged in the training and accomplished the preparations essential to assure such a capability.

Unfortunately, the 16 nations cannot be assured that such a belief is well-founded. True, NATO has in being a command and control structure ready to go to war. It is also true that units and organizations of the NATO allies are comfortable operating together. But the military leaders find themselves unable to complete the job.

The critical elements of interoperability, aside from human willingness, are communications linkage and standardization of material means. While most of NATO's military activities are conducted in English, the communications problem—adequate liaison and netted communications systems— remains unsolved. The lack of equipment standardization complicates severely the problems of the logistics system. We have made strides in adopting common ammunition and fuels, but cannot begin to provide repair parts, tools and facilities required to keep the wide variety of equipment in operation in combat.

The Roth–Glenn–Nunn Amendment to the Defense Authorization Act of 1983 provides an opportunity to attack the remaining problems of interoperability. The consensus of Congress, expressed in the amendment, promises an understanding of the compromises necessary for progress in standardization and support for the resources required for true interoperability in NATO.