
The Future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: How Valuable an Asset?

**By
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I will make two key points:

- First, I will describe how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is meeting current transatlantic security challenges.
- Second, I will highlight NATO's transformation, perhaps halfway through. We and our allies have done much more remains to be done.

Meeting Security Challenges

During the Cold War, NATO focused on Europe, because that's where the dangers were. Now, without abandoning its core missions, NATO increasingly looks outward, to dangers that can have roots far beyond Europe. These dangers include violent extremism, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, failed states, cyber attacks, and insecurity of energy resources. Protecting NATO members now also requires building partnerships and developing new capabilities.

The shift is historic. Europe's western half has been at peace since 1945, the longest peace since the Pax Romana and one now extended throughout Europe. Eleven states once behind the Iron Curtain are now democracies contributing to common security within NATO. NATO's missions span a wide geography and a wide array of activities. This trend is only going to continue. Clearly, there were differences over the war in Iraq, but they never paralyzed NATO. NATO's scope is demonstrated by NATO's two largest operations today: Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Kosovo

The Alliance has over 15,500 personnel deployed. Twenty-four of twenty-six NATO nations contribute forces to NATO peacekeeping force for Kosovo (KFOR), along with eleven non-NATO contributing countries. Over 1,500 of these are American. When Kosovo's status is resolved, which we believe will be through supervised independence, KFOR will continue to maintain a safe and secure environment during this critical time. Every poll taken in Kosovo shows NATO to be the single most respected institution there. Kosovo has been a success story for the Alliance. By proceeding with the resolution of its status, we can move toward ending our post-conflict military involvement.

Afghanistan

NATO's largest and most challenging mission, Afghanistan, says a lot about NATO today. Consolidation of a stable, democratic Afghanistan is a critical national interest for all Allies. The tools that NATO needs to succeed in Afghanistan expeditionary capability, counter-insurgency capacity, and, most important, an ability to combine security with governance and development, even when provided by other organizations, largely define the directions NATO must go in the future. Reports on a Taliban offensive this spring were in journalistic fashion for months. It never materialized thanks largely to the efforts and sacrifices of Afghan, U.S. and Allied forces.

Instead, NATO has taken the initiative with our own civil and military efforts. Thirty-seven countries', twenty-six allies and eleven non-NATO partners participate in NATO's United Nations (U.N.) mandated International Security Assistance Forces: over 40,000 troops. About 24,000 nearly 60 percent are from our allies and partners, and serve throughout all of Afghanistan.

We have continued to press allies to fill force shortfalls in International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and since last fall allies and partners have pledged well over 7,000 new troops to the mission, most without caveats. Although some caveats remain a concern, allies have expressed a willingness to come to each others' aid, should the need arise. There is a new flexibility. NATO forces serve side-by-side with Afghan National Security Forces. We are also doing everything possible to train and equip Afghan National Army and Police forces. The recent supplemental passed by Congress, which provided funding to better train and equip Afghan forces, has helped us leverage even more from other contributors.

Today Afghanistan has a democratically elected President and Parliament. Five million refugees have returned. The number of children attending school has increased five-fold to six million, two million of those girls had no access to schools under the Taliban.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Missile Defense

NATO faces the possibility that some of the world's most threatening and unstable regimes can develop nuclear weapons. Iran already possesses hundreds of medium range and short-range ballistic missiles. The United States has proposed a long-range missile defense system in Europe, and at April's (2007) meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Oslo our NATO allies were nearly unanimous in support. Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer has noted that U.S. missile defense plans do not upset the strategic balance of Europe, and that NATO could help bolt together U.S. plans with the allies national short-range missile and mid-range missile defense systems with the U.S. system, and hopefully even in cooperation with Russia. As has always been the case at NATO, our and other national defense efforts contribute to security for the alliance as a whole. Security, as we learned the hard way in the 20th century, is indivisible; if Europe is not secure, the United States is not secure.

Transformation

In 1994, NATO had sixteen members and no partners. It had never conducted a military operation. At the end of 2005 the alliance was running eight military operations simultaneously and had twenty-six members and partnership relationships with another twenty countries around the world. Developing the capabilities so that NATO can launch and sustain these missions takes political will and resources.

The Riga Summit last November marked an important step forward in NATO's transformation to meet 21st century challenges. At Riga, the NATO Response Force (NRF) was declared to have reached full operational capability. Twenty-five thousand-strong land, air, and sea elements, the NRF can act as a quick-reaction expeditionary force. On all of these issues, there has been progress since Riga and on all, there is still more work to do.

- The Strategic Airlift Initiative is an important step in addressing one of NATO's chronic weaknesses, a lack of dedicated strategic airlift and a key capability as NATO operates thousands of miles from Europe.
- The Special Operations Force (SOF) Initiative will improve the coordination and interoperability of allies' special operations forces.
- The NATO Training Cooperation Initiative (NTCI) constitutes part of NATO outreach to new partners in the broader Middle East.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization Enlargement

A second significant transformation has been the growth in NATO's membership. NATO's enlargement is one of the great successes in Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. This process continues as Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia complete another cycle of the membership action plan seek invitations in 2008, and as Georgia, and perhaps Ukraine pursue reforms and seek eventual NATO and possibly European Union (E.U.) membership. Others, such as Montenegro, Bosnia, and Serbia, may also choose this path.

The Way Ahead

The April 2008 Bucharest Summit will seek to build on these successes, strengthening NATO's capacity and its global reach to undertake global missions with partners around the globe. NATO has more to do in each category, but it is in action in key operations in the world, and it is the greatest security instrument of the transatlantic democratic community to deal with security challenges today and tomorrow.