

# **NATO: A Strategic Concept for Transatlantic Security**

Statement by

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NATO has undergone a remarkable transformation since the end of the Cold War. Not only has the alliance persisted despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it has redefined its core purposes, extending democracy and stability into Central Europe, bringing peace to the Balkans, playing a major role in the effort to stabilize Afghanistan, and building a host of strategic partnerships in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions. NATO has also demonstrated that it remains the primary institutional pillar of the West, consolidating the Atlantic democracies as a meaningful community of common interests and values. The durability of the alliance is testimony to the fact that North America and Europe remain each other's best partners.

At the same time, making the most of the Atlantic partnership requires recognizing that in a world of diverse threats, NATO no longer enjoys the unity and solidarity that it did during the Cold War. Alliance members have diverging views of the nature and urgency of the operation in Afghanistan and have varying levels of capability to contribute to the mission, leading to an inequitable sharing of burdens. Disagreements have emerged across the Atlantic and within Europe on numerous other issues, including the future of NATO enlargement, alliance relations with Russia, and an appropriate division of labor between NATO and the European Union (EU).

Such differences are hardly fleeting. Rather, they reflect alternative strategic visions for the alliance: the United States tends to see NATO as a tool for addressing global security challenges; members in Western Europe envisage NATO as a vehicle for tethering the United States to Europe and stabilizing and expanding Europe in step with the EU; Central European members focus more on the need to hedge against the potential resurgence of a threat from Russia.<sup>1</sup> The alliance will not be able to overcome these deep-seated differences. Instead, members will need to learn how to tolerate them and strike reasonable compromises if NATO is to remain effective in the absence of a clear strategic consensus.

The global nature of threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation begs the question of NATO's geographic and functional scope. In addition, the West, which has been the

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the alternative strategic visions that have emerged among NATO members, see Timo Noetzel and Benjamin Schreer, "Does a multi-tier NATO matter? The Atlantic alliance and the process of strategic change," *International Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 2 (2009), pp. 211-226.

strategic pivot of global affairs since World War II, is confronted with the challenge of adapting the international system to the rise of China, India, and other powers. In this respect, the Atlantic democracies no longer have the luxury of focusing primarily on their own affairs, but must also address the role that the West should play in shaping the international order that comes next.

In the analysis that follows, I lay out a risk-averse approach to NATO's future – one based upon the supposition that it is preferable to conserve NATO's integrity by keeping its will and resources in balance with its commitments, rather than to tax the alliance with responsibilities that risk compromising its credibility and coherence. NATO should continue to anchor the West while the Atlantic democracies address a global agenda, but efforts to turn NATO into a global alliance risk stretching it past the breaking point. Instead, NATO should serve as a model for and assist with defense cooperation and integration in other regions, meanwhile putting its focus on seeing through its mission in Afghanistan and addressing unfinished business in the broader European theater: improving its operational capability, in particular by strengthening its European pillar; locking in peace in the Balkans; deepening ties to partner countries to the south and east; building a more cooperative relationship with Russia; and addressing unconventional threats such as cyber-attack, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism. I begin by discussing NATO's core purposes, then turn to NATO's role in Europe and its responsibilities beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, and end with a brief reflection on Congress and the alliance.

### **Defining Purposes**

***Anchoring the West.*** During its first forty years, NATO's main purpose was to integrate and defend the West. During the past twenty years, it has focused primarily on expanding the West and, following the attacks of September 11, contributing to the mission in Afghanistan. Looking forward, NATO's defining purpose should be to anchor the West while simultaneously serving to coordinate its political and military engagement within and beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. *It is essential to view NATO as much more than a military tool-kit: it is perhaps the primary institution responsible for preserving the coherence and effectiveness of the West as a political community.* That function, back-stopped by transatlantic cooperation in a multiplicity of other forms, will grow increasingly important over time as global power shifts away from the Atlantic democracies, and western-dominated bodies such as the G-8 turn into far more diverse bodies such as the G-20.

***Collective Defense.*** In the aftermath of the war in Georgia and the Obama administration's outreach to Russia and alteration of plans for missile defense, Central European members of NATO have grown uneasy about the alliance's commitment to collective defense and what they perceive as insufficient concern in Western Europe and the United States about Russian intentions. In this respect, NATO should bolster the integrity of Article 5 and reassure Central Europeans about its commitment to collective defense. The alliance can do so through planning, exercises, and military modernization and reform (including missile defense). Shortcomings in the NATO operation in

Afghanistan (see below) further underscore the need to enhance NATO's operational capability. At the same time, the remilitarization of NATO's eastern frontier would be both unnecessary and needlessly provocative in light of the extremely low probability of overt Russian aggression against NATO territory. Looking forward, NATO should also pay increased attention to unconventional threats to its members, including cyber-attack, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. Energy security warrants a place on NATO's agenda, although that issue should be addressed primarily through EU efforts to formulate a coherent energy policy and through EU-U.S. consultation.

***Complete the Pacification of Europe.*** NATO, working in tandem with the EU, needs to consolidate peace in the Balkans and work to extend stability to Ukraine, Georgia, and other states on Russia's periphery. It should meanwhile pursue engagement with Russia and, should Moscow prove to be a willing partner, work toward drawing Russia as well as its neighbors into the Euro-Atlantic community.

***Engage Beyond Europe, but with Due Modesty.*** Many of the most pressing international challenges of the day arise from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO has a role to play in meeting some of these challenges, but seeking to globalize NATO would saddle it with unsustainable burdens and insurmountable political divides. The mission in Afghanistan, although a top priority for NATO, continues to reveal the difficulties entailed in sustaining alliance solidarity in out-of-area missions. Accordingly, even as it stays the course in Afghanistan, NATO should view additional missions outside the Euro-Atlantic area with caution, and in general limit the scope of its global engagement to training and assistance, serving as an exemplar, and helping other regional bodies help themselves.

### **NATO In Europe**

NATO remains the primary institution of the Euro-Atlantic security order. As it seeks to broaden and consolidate the Euro-Atlantic community, NATO should seek to strengthen its ties both to the EU and to those countries in Europe's east which have yet to be formally included in either NATO or the EU. A more capable and more collective EU and better linkages between NATO and the EU are needed to help rebalance the Atlantic partnership. The Atlantic link will be well served if the EU enhances its ability to share burdens and be a more equal partner of the United States. Meanwhile, by reaching out to Russia and its neighbors, NATO has the opportunity to spread its pacifying and integrating effects further eastward and southward.

***The European Pillar.*** With the United States bearing the burden of two costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a wide range of commitments elsewhere, strengthening the EU pillar within the alliance is of growing urgency. Unless EU members do a better job of aggregating their political will and resources, Europe risks becoming of declining strategic relevance to the United States. On the other hand, if EU members allocate their defense spending more effectively and take advantage of the institutional changes foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty to forge a more common security policy and assume greater international responsibilities, NATO and the Atlantic link will be primary beneficiaries.

France's integration into NATO's military structure advances the prospect for better cooperation between the EU and NATO, helping the two organizations reinforce, rather than compete, with each other. Overcoming Turkey's discomfort with European defense – perhaps by including it in EU deliberations and planning on security matters – would also advance the cause of strengthening the EU pillar. Building a more capable EU is primarily up to Europeans: they must increase their deployable military and civilian assets and ensure that the more capable institutions envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty are not offset by the re-nationalization of European politics. But the United States can help by making clear its unequivocal support for a strong Europe and engaging the EU at the collective level as its institutions mature.

***Decision Making.*** In addition to strengthening its European pillar, NATO must also address potential changes to its decision-making apparatus to ensure its effectiveness. In the absence of the unifying threat posed by the Soviet Union, NATO solidarity is more difficult to sustain – as made clear by the inequitable division of labor in Afghanistan. To ensure that divergent perspectives do not become a source of paralysis, the alliance should consider moving away from a consensus-based approach to taking decisions. Options such as the formation of coalitions of the willing and the use of constructive abstentions (members opt out of rather than block joint action) are worth exploring to provide NATO greater flexibility in decision making.

***Russia.*** As the new secretary general of NATO recently affirmed, it is time for the alliance to embark on a “new beginning” with Russia. This objective is in line with the Obama administration's call for “resetting” relations between Washington and Moscow. Russia has indicated a willingness to explore these potential openings. President Medvedev has called for a “new European security architecture” – although it is not yet clear what the Kremlin has in mind. More importantly, it remains to be seen whether Russia pursues policies toward Iran, Georgia, arms control, energy, and other issues that would indicate its willingness to be a reliable partner of the West.

If such cooperation from Moscow is indeed forthcoming, then the United States, NATO, and the EU should work together to anchor Russia in the Euro-Atlantic community. What form such inclusion can and should take needs to be determined as the options become clearer. At this point, efforts should focus on making more of the NATO-Russia Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), engaging Moscow's call to explore potential links between NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and advancing concrete cooperation on issues such as Afghanistan, arms control, missile defense, and maritime security.

***Ukraine and Georgia.*** As the United States and its NATO partners reach out to Russia, they should make clear that a “new beginning” depends on Russia's willingness to respect the independence and autonomy of Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries on Russia's periphery. Moscow may well rebuff the West's overtures and instead opt for a more distant relationship. But should confrontation prevail, it should be the consequence of Moscow's missteps, not because the members of NATO failed to do their best to include Russia in Europe's post-Cold War settlement. In this respect, even as NATO's

door remains open to Georgia and Ukraine, the question of membership is best dealt with later rather than sooner. Neither country is ready for entry and many European leaders have reservations about moving forward on membership. Moreover, by focusing on concrete work plans rather than formal membership, the alliance can advance its links with both countries while simultaneously buying time for its relationship with Russia to deepen. The EU also has an important role to play in the broader Black Sea area, especially if NATO moves cautiously on the pace and scope of its engagement. As a strategy of anchoring Russia in the Euro-Atlantic space advances, then dealing with Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO becomes a much less complicated and volatile issue.

### **NATO Beyond Europe**

*Afghanistan.* Afghanistan will remain at the top of NATO's agenda for as long as its mission there continues. There is much good news about the NATO operation, including the fact that the alliance invoked Article 5 after the United States was attacked and proceeded to contribute to a multinational coalition that consists of 41 countries and some 35,000 non-American troops. Nonetheless, the mission exposes the imposing obstacles to NATO engagement in areas far from alliance territory. Public skepticism about the mission has constrained the size and operational scope of many national contingents – even while the Canadians, British, Danes, Dutch, and Romanians have taken on more demanding missions. Unity of command has proved elusive, as has coordination between NATO and EU efforts. At this point in the mission, it would be unrealistic to expect major new troop contributions from Europe, which is more likely to focus additional efforts on training Afghan soldiers and police and on civilian assistance – tasks which promise to take on increasing importance as U.S. and NATO strategy evolve. Moreover, it will be no easy task maintaining the NATO coalition at current levels, with domestic pressure mounting in several member states for the winding down of their national contributions.

In drawing lessons from its shortcomings in Afghanistan, the alliance should concentrate on improving operational effectiveness. Providing for common funding of alliance missions, doing away with national caveats, setting requirements for spending on modernization and interoperability, improving unity of command – these are the types of reforms that can enhance NATO's ability to conduct coalition warfare and improve its performance on the battlefield.

*A Global NATO?* NATO's experience in Afghanistan also provides good cause for being soberly cautious about the alliance's ability to become an all-purpose alliance on a global basis. To be sure, fashioning useful partnerships with willing non-members such as Australia, as NATO has done in Afghanistan, makes good sense. But in most regions of the world beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, constraints on the political will and capabilities of member states mean that the alliance will usually have to limit its engagement to providing training and assistance and helping defense organizations elsewhere do for their own regions what NATO has done for Europe. In this respect, it would make sense for NATO to enhance significantly the manpower and technical skills

that would enable it to contribute more effectively to training programs and civilian assistance.

Preventing NATO's over-stretch and husbanding its political will and solidarity is especially important as the West heads toward a global landscape in which it enjoys less material – and perhaps ideological – primacy. The Atlantic democracies should make the most of their common interests and values as they work to adjust the international system to the rise of China, India, Brazil, and other emerging powers. Even as NATO completes its mission in Afghanistan, reaches out to Russia, and consolidates the pacification of southeastern Europe, it must continue to serve as the institutional and political anchor of the West amid a changing world.

### **Bipartisanship and the Western Alliance**

During the second half of the twentieth century, American engagement abroad rested on solid bipartisan foundations. Faced with the strategic imperatives of defeating Soviet expansionism and communism, legislators generally heeded Senator Arthur Vandenberg's call in 1950 "to unite our official voice at the water's edge." Since the end of the Cold War, however, the domestic politics of foreign policy have become more fractious. Bipartisanship has eroded, regularly exposing the conduct of statecraft to deep political cleavages.

The Western alliance and America's link to Europe constitute a notable exception. The time-tested value of the alliance, the fact that it has withstood countless strains, and the thriving transatlantic commerce that has grown alongside strategic partnership have won NATO well-deserved support across the political spectrum. Not only has NATO earned the indefinite continuation of such bipartisan support, but perhaps the political lessons learned from NATO's continuing successes can help rebuild the bipartisan foundations of U.S. foreign policy in the years ahead.