

**63 EMIRATES LECTURE SERIES**

# **NATO's Growing Role in the Greater Middle East**

**Philip Gordon**



**The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research**

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All correspondence should be addressed to:

Editor-in-Chief

**Emirates Lecture Series**

ECSSR

P.O. Box 4567

Abu Dhabi

United Arab Emirates

Tel: +971-2-4044541

Fax: +971-2-4044542

E-mail: [pubdis@ecssr.ae](mailto:pubdis@ecssr.ae)

Website: <http://www.ecssr.ae>

## *Introduction*

Ten years ago, the idea of writing a substantial paper about NATO's role in the Greater Middle East\* would have been implausible. Indeed, at that time NATO was only tentatively involved in southeast Europe – let alone southwest Asia – and the organization's own future remained highly uncertain. In August 1995, after four years of hesitation and debate over the issue of extending the zone of operation of what had once been a strictly defensive alliance, NATO intervened militarily for the first time in Bosnia. However, this only occurred after organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the Western European Union (WEU) were seen to have failed, and the mission was not regarded as a precedent for Alliance action in the Middle East or Asia. At the time, few could have envisaged that a decade later NATO would be deploying over 10,000 troops to Afghanistan, training Iraqi military forces in Baghdad and increasing its political and military cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

That, however, is precisely the situation today. Over the past several years, this once entirely “North Atlantic” institution has:

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\* A vast region defined here to include the area stretching from Arab northeast Africa all the way to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and including the Gulf.

- invoked its Article 5 defense clause for the first time ever, following the September 11 attacks in the United States;
- deployed a peacekeeping force of nearly 9,000 troops to Northern Afghanistan and committed to expand that mission geographically (to the south) and quantitatively (by another 6,000 troops);
- launched a 9 million euro training operation for Iraqi forces involving contributions from all 26 NATO members;
- created the NATO Response Force (NRF), a grouping of some 20,000 forces and equipment that can be called together at short notice and deployed anywhere around the world;
- deployed the NRF in an earthquake relief operation in Pakistan;
- established an air-bridge to supply soldiers from the African Union (AU) to a peacekeeping mission in Sudan;
- launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) to develop its political and military relations with members of the GCC;
- expanded its Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) to facilitate political dialogue with Middle Eastern countries including Egypt;
- enlarged the scope of political discussions in the North Atlantic Council to include briefings on a range of Middle Eastern and global issues; and

- established a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Response (CBRNR) team to help deal with possible weapons of mass destruction contingencies.

Many of these operations are limited in scope and political discussions in and about the Greater Middle East are still in their early stages. Nonetheless, the trend toward greater Alliance involvement in the region is clear and NATO's role in this area is likely to continue to grow. NATO is in the process of fitfully transforming itself into a global security organization in terms of its missions, its participation and possibly even its future membership.

NATO will not become a security alliance for the Middle East – as it was for Western Europe – with US and European bases scattered throughout the region. Nonetheless, despite all the differences among NATO members and the obstacles to a NATO role in the Middle East region, the fact remains that the United States and Europe will continue to have significant common security interests there, and NATO remains the best mechanism for coordinating their policies and operations. Those who have for years predicted NATO's demise will, in all likelihood, continue to be confounded.

### *Why NATO's Role in the Middle East is Expanding*

When asked why he robbed banks, the American outlaw Willy Sutton allegedly responded, "Because that's where

the money is.” The explanation for why NATO is becoming involved in the Greater Middle East is just as simple—because that’s where the crises are. Originally founded for the purpose of defending Western Europe against the Soviet threat, NATO is a security alliance that will ultimately only survive if it deals with the current security challenges faced by its members. As it happens, most of those challenges are in the Greater Middle East.

As a region, the Greater Middle East is viewed by the West as an area of concern in terms of issues such as WMD proliferation; terrorism; interstate conflict; failed states; immigration; and civil war. Therefore, European and North American leaders and populations have a strong strategic self-interest in promoting security in the Middle East. On issues ranging from preventing nuclear proliferation (for example in Iran), fighting terrorists (Iraq and Afghanistan) and peacekeeping (Afghanistan), to deterring interstate conflict and promoting defense reform and sound civil-military relations, NATO members have more interest in this region than in any other. If NATO were to restrict itself to the old agenda of defending Western Europe it would wither and die. Therefore, it appears that its members have decided to use the organization to deal with a wider range of challenges and threats, which is why it is becoming increasingly involved in the Greater Middle East.



Another reason for NATO's continued survival and its growing activity in the Greater Middle East is the fact that both Europeans and Americans have come to the realization that they still need each other—more than either side suspected when the Cold War ended. For all the talk of the differing threat perceptions across the Atlantic and the building of an autonomous European defense force, most Europeans recognize that they still need some form of security partnership with the United States.

Europe wants more defense autonomy but is not willing to pay for it. Whereas the US defense budget continues to rise – so much so, that it will soon be spending more than the rest of the world combined – European defense budgets remain stagnant.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Europeans realize that the United States will be driving the security agenda in the Greater Middle East – as is the case in Iraq – and would prefer to have some say over US actions within NATO than to drop out of the picture altogether. Finally, as much as they resent unilateral US leadership, a number of the smaller and more Atlanticist European states have no interest in exclusive membership of an EU defense force dominated by their larger European neighbors. The result of all this is continued European support for a significant NATO role.

Similarly, the US is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of its alliance with Europe. In the early 2000s, after a decade of phenomenal growth in US economic,

technological and military power and the disappearance of its only peer competitor, many in the United States took the view that NATO had become redundant. They believed that a powerful United States did not need allies and that they would only bog it down. Key players in the early Bush administration had explicitly criticized their predecessors for fighting a “war by committee” (in Kosovo) and for being excessively deferential to European allies. When the time came to fight a war in Afghanistan in late 2001, the United States’ message to the NATO allies (delivered by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz at a NATO meeting in October 2001) was essentially “don’t call us, we’ll call you.” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained that the “mission would determine the coalition and not the other way around,” implying that NATO as a formal, standing alliance was of little use to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past several years, however, US views regarding its allies in general and NATO in particular have changed. The unwillingness of some key European allies to support the war in Iraq – where the US ended up bearing an overwhelming proportion of the costs, both in terms of blood and funds – revealed the potential value of allies, both in terms of legitimacy and military support. With US forces now so overstretched, the benefits of allied contributions have become more obvious to the average American. The US budgetary picture has also changed dramatically—from the biggest surpluses in US history

(over \$200 billion in 2001) to the biggest deficits it has ever faced (more than \$400 billion in 2005). This has also increased the importance of allies in the US perception. It is therefore no coincidence that in 2005 the second Bush administration began by emphasizing the importance of diplomacy, or that the first foreign visits made by the President and Secretary of State were to NATO and the EU.

Ultimately, despite the strategic differences between the United States and Europe, Americans and Europeans still recognize the advantages of working together as allies. The Greater Middle East is of central concern to both Europe and the United States and, while understanding the limits of NATO's capabilities, both sides also recognize that it is in their interest to have a unified command structure, interoperable forces that train together, a common military doctrine and a forum for political dialogue on security issues. NATO will never be an exclusive mechanism for US and European security cooperation in the Greater Middle East, but it is likely to remain a central one.

### *NATO Missions in the Greater Middle East*

With each passing year, and in ways no one could have foreseen, NATO's role in the Greater Middle East has continued to expand. Peacekeeping and counterterrorism in Afghanistan, training military forces in Iraq, humanitarian intervention in Pakistan and Sudan and political-security dialogue in the Gulf and North Africa are just some of the

ways in which the Alliance has become more involved in the region.

There is a lack of consensus on the issue of NATO's role beyond Europe and a number of members are reluctant to see the Alliance move too far from its traditional missions. Many worry that it will usurp the potential geopolitical role of the EU. Moreover, it is unclear whether NATO member states are willing to devote the defense resources necessary for the Alliance's missions to continue to expand, both geographically and functionally. In particular, many European members of NATO are unwilling to spend the amounts of money and take the kind of risks that might be necessary to ensure NATO's future success. Also, where the Greater Middle East is concerned, it remains unclear whether the inhabitants of the region will be willing to accept NATO's long-term involvement—unlike that of the former colonial powers or more recently the United States. Thus, a review of NATO's expanding missions in the region shows considerable promise, but also considerable challenges.

### **The NATO Mission in Afghanistan**

NATO's largest and most important mission in the Greater Middle East is in Afghanistan—the first mission of its kind outside Europe. NATO's involvement there began in August 2003, when no volunteers could be found to take over command of the UN-mandated International Security

and Assistance Force (ISAF). Initially deployed only in Kabul (first under British and then Turkish national command), the ISAF has gradually expanded geographically, mostly through the establishment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in a growing number of cities throughout the country. This began in the north of the country (Kunduz, Mazar-E-Sharif, Meymana, Feyzabad, and Baghlan) and then expanded to include the west (Herat, Farah, Chagcharan and Qal'eh-Now). The PRT concept marries the presence of a military force to provide security, with direct involvement in nation-building tasks like the construction of schools and hospitals and the digging of wells. Each PRT is led by a different NATO member state.

In November 2005, the North Atlantic Council agreed to expand NATO's role further, by adding some 6,000 more NATO troops (bringing the total to over 15,000) and extending ISAF's mandate to include the more dangerous southern parts of the country. Eventually the force will also enter the east, potentially involving NATO forces in counterterrorism operations as well as peacekeeping and giving the organization responsibility for the entire territory of Afghanistan. In conjunction with the expanding NATO deployment, the United States intends to initially reduce its separate force presence in Operation Enduring Freedom by some 2,500 troops, leaving 16,500 in place.

NATO's Afghanistan mission provides a good example of the enduring utility of the Alliance and the type of contribution it can make to security in the Greater Middle East. In Kabul, the northern and western parts of the country, ISAF troops are greeted extremely positively by the local population – a phenomenon I witnessed first-hand during a December 2005 visit – and have made visible contributions to economic development through their work with local governments, schools and utilities. NATO is helping to coordinate the activities of troops from 37 different countries, a task which would be much more difficult without the Alliance's permanent structures, internal relationships and political legitimacy.

It would be irresponsible, however, to overlook the problems with the NATO mission, and premature to declare it a success. For instance, NATO's staying power has yet to be put to the test, as it is likely to be after taking on new missions in the south. In fact, violence against Westerners is rising precipitously, as Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters mimic the methods of Iraqi insurgents and attempt to undermine support at home for the NATO mission. Indeed, of the nearly 30 suicide attacks against NATO forces since the mission began, almost two-thirds have taken place since the summer of 2005. Partly as a result, some NATO members are having second-thoughts about their expanded deployment. If a large number of European troops are killed while taking part in the NATO mission, European public support will also be put to the test.

Another problem is that NATO forces are yet to be provided with the resources they require to fulfill their mission. Last year, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had to campaign vigorously to persuade member states to provide ISAF with the handful of transport helicopters it required, and still today the entire mission gets by with only two dedicated fixed-wing transport aircraft (one Danish and one Dutch C-130.) While all NATO militaries are admittedly overstretched, it is a disconcerting sign that NATO governments are hoping to conduct the Afghanistan mission “on the cheap,” which will limit its prospects for success.

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether NATO members are entirely ready to undertake the types of risks associated with the Afghanistan mission. While the overall rules of engagement for the operation are fairly robust, each contributing nation is operating under so-called national “caveats” which strictly limit what their troops can do. These caveats add up to some 14 pages of detailed instructions that limit NATO forces’ willingness to fly under certain conditions (at night for example), operate outside specific geographical zones, use certain types of force or accept certain types of missions. According to a British general involved in the ISAF mission, these “wretched” caveats make his job immeasurably more difficult.<sup>3</sup>

NATO's unprecedented effort to help provide the new Afghan government with enough stability to get off the ground and begin dealing with the enormous problems of underdevelopment, drug-running, corruption and warlordism, is a huge test for the Alliance and its commitment to the Greater Middle East. By committing 15,000 soldiers to an operation half-way around the world, NATO has bet the bank on Afghanistan. The mission will either prove NATO's potential usefulness in the region and beyond, or raise serious questions about its current and future purpose.

### **The NATO Training Mission in Iraq**

Iraq is more a story of division within NATO than of unity. Indeed, the debate about Iraq nearly tore the Alliance apart and almost led to its demise in early 2003. More recently, however, divisions among the allies have diminished, cooperation and agreement on objectives have increased and NATO has taken on its first formal role in Iraq—a military training mission outside Baghdad. The Iraq training mission is a limited one, but it has the potential to lead to more significant NATO involvement in the region.

The cooperation which led to the NATO training mission contrasts greatly with the crisis that the Iraq mission initially provoked within the organization. Convinced that European allies like France and Germany would never



agree to make Iraq a NATO operation, and opposed to limiting US freedom to maneuver by sharing political control over an eventual operation, the United States never had any intention of using NATO to fight in Iraq—"I can't imagine it ... it hasn't crossed my mind," said Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>4</sup> However, by November 2002, stung by criticism that it had snubbed its NATO allies during the Afghanistan operation in the fall of 2001 and anxious to win European backing for a possible Iraq war, the United States began to consider how NATO might at least become associated with a possible operation. Washington ultimately proposed to ask NATO to play a support role, sending AWACS surveillance aircraft and Patriot antimissile batteries to help defend Turkey, and using NATO naval forces to assist in the defense of US ships heading to the Arabian Gulf.

Even such a limited role proved too much for some allies and in January 2003 France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg blocked NATO from undertaking any advance planning for an Iraq contingency, on the grounds that such action would imply that war was inevitable (and therefore legal)—a point they were not prepared to concede. The United States, on the other hand, was determined to involve NATO, and insisted (under the NATO Treaty's Article 4 provision for consultations) on debating the issue. The clash came to a head in February 2003 when France, Germany and Belgium continued to veto NATO's preparation for a possible defense of Turkey,

while the US insisted that this was a Treaty obligation. Even senior US officials such as Secretary of State Colin Powell, who put a premium on working with allies, called the European opposition “inexcusable” and expressed fears that the alliance was “breaking itself up because it will not meet its responsibilities.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the crisis was only resolved after the United States agreed to scale back its proposal (eliminating the request that European NATO forces replace US forces deployed from Europe to the Gulf and focusing only on AWACS aircraft and Patriots for Turkey) and the Europeans agreed to approve the measure in NATO’s Defense Planning Committee—of which France is not a member.

The NATO dispute showed just how tense transatlantic relations had become and raised questions about both sides’ commitment to using the Alliance and NATO’s potential applicability in the Middle East. While most NATO governments supported both the Iraq mission and a NATO role in it, European populations were deeply opposed to it and in many ways the strong Franco-German opposition to the war more accurately represented European public opinion than did the leadership of the other European countries.

However, since the spring 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq these transatlantic divisions have gradually diminished and NATO allies have rediscovered a common interest in Iraq’s success, showing more

willingness to pursue it together. For a while after the invasion it seemed to many Americans as if France and Germany had an interest in a US “defeat” – lest their analysis be proven wrong and the United States proceed to undertake other “adventures” in the region – but that attitude now seems to have evaporated. The United States has been chastened by the difficulties of stabilizing Iraq, and most Europeans clearly recognize that the negative consequences of US failure in Iraq far outweigh those of US success.

Today, NATO allies have stopped arguing over the relative merits of invading Iraq and have begun to work together to support the elected Iraqi government. At the Istanbul summit in June 2004, the allies agreed to help train Iraqi military forces both within and outside of Iraq. They have since set up the NATO Training Mission and Joint Staff College at Ar-Rustamiyah near Baghdad, whose mission is to train and mentor mid- and senior-level Iraqi officers and to implant values appropriate to democratically controlled armed forces. The NATO mission also helps to coordinate the training contributions of NATO partner countries. As of early 2006, 16 NATO members had sent forces to Iraq to take part in the mission, but all 26 NATO members are making financial contributions towards the mission's 9 million euro cost. Even France – which has not sent forces to Iraq – is providing 2 million euros, making it the second largest financial contributor, while Germany is providing military

training for Iraqis in the UAE. The goal of the NATO mission is to train 910 officers per year in Iraq and 500 abroad.

With only 165 NATO officers on the ground, the Iraq Training Mission is hardly a decisive contribution. Still, the political symbolism of NATO putting past divisions behind it and all 26 members agreeing to support a NATO role could be a sign that NATO's involvement will increase in the future. Already, allies are examining the PRT concept being used in Afghanistan to ascertain whether it might be applicable in Iraq. Major contributions of new European forces are unlikely while the security situation in Iraq remains so unstable, but it is certainly possible to imagine that if the situation stabilizes, NATO's role might grow. The allies are at least now in agreement that they have a huge common stake in Iraq's future, and all seem to recognize the potential value which institutionalized allied cooperation can add.

### **Supporting Peacekeeping in Sudan**

Since early 2003, a humanitarian crisis has unfolded in Darfur, Sudan, as Arab Janjaweed militias – with the support of the government in Khartoum – wage an ethnic war against a largely black rebel movement. The conflict has led to some 300,000 civilian deaths and left nearly 2.5 million people homeless. Senior US officials have said

that the government-supported attacks in Darfur amount to “genocide.”<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to stem the violence, the African Union (AU) declared that it was willing to deploy peacekeepers to the region, and in April 2005 asked NATO for assistance with logistics and training so that it could increase its force presence in Sudan from 2,500 to 7,500 troops. In June, NATO agreed to undertake its first mission in Africa, a further example of the Alliance's new commitment to non-traditional missions and its expanding involvement outside the North Atlantic region. The mission began on July 1, 2005 and has so far transported more than 4,000 AU troops. NATO has also held Staff Capacity Building Workshops for AU officers in Ethiopia and supplied officers for UN peacekeeping exercises with the AU mission in Sudan.

The Darfur mission was a source of controversy within the Alliance, demonstrating the continued transatlantic divisions over NATO's role. EU members such as France and Belgium resisted a NATO role in Africa and argued that the European Union, which was already helping the AU with logistics, was better placed to take on the role. After months of debate (which delayed the NATO operation), they agreed that NATO could proceed but that the EU would also continue with and expand its own mission. As a result, a number of countries, including France, Germany and Italy, are running their airlift

operations to Darfur through the EU while US forces are using NATO. The separate air missions are controlled through a coordination cell in the Netherlands and each works separately with an AU coordinating cell in Addis Ababa. NATO and EU officials say that the NATO–EU coordination has not posed serious problems for the mission, but the fact that the two Brussels-based organizations are running separate logistics operations to the same region underscores the enduring differences over the respective roles of the two organizations.

NATO's willingness to assist in the training of AU peacekeepers and their transportation to Darfur fulfils an important function, given the AU's own lack of logistical assets. Many observers, however, argue that NATO needs to do more than provide transport for other countries' troops. In May 2005, for example, a group mostly made up of former NATO foreign ministers and led by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called on NATO to draw on its Response Force to "put a brigade-sized element at the disposal of the United Nations to augment the AU force until it can build up sufficient strength on its own."<sup>7</sup>

In January 2006, the UN Special Envoy to Sudan, Jan Pronk, concluded that three years of African peacekeeping efforts had "failed" and that a larger force of Western soldiers was required to put an end to the fighting. Pronk appealed to the Security Council to put together a force of

up to 20,000 peacekeepers, with the authority to use force to stop attacks against civilians and to disarm militias. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the UN would be “turning to” the United States, Europe and other industrialized powers to contribute to the new force.<sup>8</sup> Such a direct commitment of Western forces would be significantly more risky and costly than the logistics and training efforts undertaken to date and appears to be beyond what US and European political leaders are prepared to provide. If those leaders do decide, however, that the Darfur situation merits military intervention and that the AU is not up to the task, they might feel more comfortable asking NATO, perhaps under UN auspices, to play the leading role.

### **The Pakistan Relief Mission**

On October 8, 2005, a devastating earthquake in Pakistan's Kashmir region killed more than 70,000 people, seriously injured nearly 70,000 and displaced more than 3 million from their homes. Faced with pleas from Pakistan and the international community to help deliver urgent relief supplies, on October 13 NATO began airlifting supplies donated by Slovenia and Sweden and immediately began to examine other ways in which it could be of assistance. On October 21 the Alliance finalized plans to provide helicopters and up to 1,000 troops (including an engineering battalion) and other staff drawn from the recently established NATO

Response Force (NRF). The Pakistan earthquake relief mission is a further extension of the Alliance's functional and geographical responsibilities.

The core of the operation consists of an air-bridge to deliver relief supplies – such as tents, blankets, food and stoves – from NATO member and partner countries and from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). NATO has deployed 11 C-130 transport aircraft from the NRF (from Britain, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, and Turkey) to Incirlik airbase in Turkey. From there and other home bases in Europe the aircraft ferry relief supplies to Kashmir. The supplies are coordinated by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC), which is working with the UN, the EU and the Pakistani Embassy in Brussels. By the end of 2005 it had delivered over 1,000 tons of supplies.

The Pakistan relief operation received widespread support from all NATO members who had a shared goal of helping Pakistan and had agreed that NATO could make a contribution. However, the mission also raised serious questions that the Alliance has yet to answer.

Some critics worried that the deployment of the NRF for humanitarian relief would make it unavailable for crisis-response missions and argued that NATO did not have sufficient resources to take on all the operations it was



agreeing to. The Pakistan deployment also raised serious questions about how NATO operates financially, with only a few common assets and contributing nations bearing nearly all the costs of any given operation. In the case of the NRF deployment to Pakistan, the fact that Poland, Spain and Italy happened to have been the main NRF contributors at the time of the earthquake meant that they bore most of the costs of what was supposed to be a joint NATO operation. While the leaders of those countries strongly supported NATO assistance to Pakistan, they resented the fact that their national budgets had to bear a disproportionate share of the financial burden. For years NATO has been discussing the possibility of more equitable cost-sharing programs, but has so far been unable to agree upon a workable plan, leaving some operations under funded—including the mission to Pakistan.

### **The Expanded Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative**

A different type of NATO involvement in the Greater Middle East comes in the form of an expanded political-military dialogue with Middle Eastern, North African and Gulf countries. Acknowledging the growing importance of the Greater Middle East to the security concerns of its members, NATO has for more than a decade sought to increase its interaction with the governments and peoples of the region. In 1994, the Alliance launched a

“Mediterranean Dialogue” (MD) with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia as a means of better understanding the security concerns of those countries, encouraging them to work with each other and dispelling their suspicions about NATO’s role in their region. Discussions within the MD focused on defense planning and budgeting, civil–military relations, the democratic control of armed forces, WMD proliferation, civil emergency planning and humanitarian relief.

The Mediterranean Dialogue has not played a major role since its launch. Unlike NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) with Central and East European countries, the MD was never linked to potential NATO accession for its participants, and while the contacts between NATO and MD countries were useful, the discussions rarely touched on the key security issues of the day. Moreover, Arab–Israeli differences often prevented the MD countries themselves from working with each other or moving the dialogue forward. At its June 2004 Istanbul summit, NATO members offered to try to breathe new life into the Mediterranean Dialogue, but it is unclear whether its members will be any more interested in it now than in the past.

Perhaps more promisingly, NATO leaders also launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) at the summit—the first formal relationship between NATO and the Arab states of the Gulf. In some ways similar to the MD, the ICI is designed to expand dialogue and to provide a forum for

practical cooperation between NATO and the countries of the Gulf region. NATO began by offering ICI membership to the countries of the GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). The offer was initially accepted by Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait, while the UAE followed in June 2005.

The ICI is not precisely defined, and relationships between NATO and each ICI member vary according to separate national agreements and the interests of the ICI members themselves. The broad categories for cooperation will include:

- NATO assistance with defense reform, defense budgeting, defense planning and civil-military relations;
- military to military cooperation to contribute to interoperability;
- military exercises, education and training—possibly including ICI member participation in PfP exercises;
- anti-terrorism cooperation, including maritime interdiction efforts and intelligence sharing;
- efforts to control the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery;
- border security related to terrorism and illegal trafficking; and
- civil emergency planning and disaster assistance.

The MD and ICI will only advance as far as their participants – and NATO members – are prepared to take

them. They are, however, potential steps toward greater NATO interaction with a number of states in a region where NATO itself is clearly becoming more involved. If the MD and ICI states want to develop their cooperation with NATO beyond these initial steps, they are likely to find NATO a willing partner.

### **Expanded Political Dialogue within NATO**

A final aspect of NATO's growing involvement in the Greater Middle East should be mentioned—NATO's willingness to talk about it. In the past, many NATO member states have been reluctant to allow their Permanent Representatives at the North Atlantic Council to undertake what might be construed as political and strategic discussions beyond the scope of a military alliance. However, an early priority of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (who took up his post in January 2004) was to encourage the NAC to widen its political discussions. The logic behind it was that if NATO was to become increasingly involved in global issues (this being before NATO took on missions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan) it should expand its consultations on the political context surrounding its missions.

In spite of the resistance of those member states that oppose what they believe to be an excessively political role for NATO, some progress has been made in this

regard. Over the past year, the NAC has had briefings from capitals, including Washington, by senior officials on policy issues such as Middle East democracy, Israeli–Palestinian relations and post-conflict nation building efforts, including in Iraq. Neither the United States or Europe is prepared to sacrifice political independence on Middle East political issues to collective Alliance decision-making, but the old inhibitions over discussing these issues are gradually fading.

### *Challenges for NATO in the Greater Middle East*

The story of NATO's involvement in the Greater Middle East over the past decade is one of increasing activity, which points to a potentially significant future role in the region. In the past five years alone, NATO has not only deployed thousands of troops to the wider region but undertaken new peacekeeping, humanitarian, emergency relief and political outreach missions. It would be naïve, however, to conclude that NATO's growing involvement in the region is a linear or irreversible trend. Many of the missions undertaken so far are quite limited in scope and have all led to serious controversy among NATO members. There is still no consensus within the Alliance on the precise role it should play in the Greater Middle East and on major challenges that must be met if NATO's role is to continue to grow.

## **The Struggle for Internal Consensus**

One of the most serious challenges facing NATO concerns the internal consensus of an Alliance that now contains 26 members – stretching from Canada to Turkey, and Estonia to Italy – and which has a number of other potential members (Ukraine, Georgia and several Balkan states) waiting in the wings. Because of the sensitivity of military actions, NATO will always make its most important decisions by consensus, which means that any disagreements among the 26 members can block or severely delay action—as they have done repeatedly over the past several years. In that sense, missions such as peacekeeping in Afghanistan and earthquake relief in Pakistan may well be exceptions to the rule—and even those missions were (and remain) controversial.

As the Iraq debate and transatlantic differences over the “war on terrorism” have shown, differing attitudes towards foreign policy – particularly concerning the use of force – continue to separate the United States from most of its European allies. As the world’s “sole superpower” with unparalleled military, technological and economic resources, the United States has a tendency to want to “fix” problems, whereas Europe tends to want to “manage” them. The vast military power, technological prowess and history of accomplishment of the United States have left it with a sense of “can-do” optimism about the world, in stark contrast to the relative pessimism – some would say

“realism” – that comes from the more complicated historical experiences of Europe’s much older nation-states. Moreover, a sense of responsibility for strategic stability worldwide and the unmatched ability to project military force anywhere around the globe leads the US to believe not only that it can resort to military force but that it is able to do so successfully. Many Europeans, by contrast, have come to believe that global security can only be assured by multilateral cooperation among states, and that using force can often make problems worse.<sup>9</sup>

These transatlantic differences seem to have diminished since they irrupted into crisis in 2003, and the recent growth in NATO activity suggests that they can be overcome. Many Americans have been chastened by the experience in Iraq (the percentage of those who thought the war was just has fallen from nearly 80% in 2003 to under 50% today) and are no longer so sure that their hawkish approach is better than European caution. Still, differences in strategic culture which have built up over more than fifty years will not disappear overnight. Recent transatlantic debates over torture, detainees, wiretapping and secret CIA prisons underscore the fact that many in the United States continue to believe that the “war on terror” requires a much more robust approach than most Europeans do. The allies have come together over the past three years on these issues – which is encouraging for NATO’s future – but one cannot overlook the fact that the on-going differences over the use of force

continue to place constraints on the type of role NATO is able to play.

There is also a lack of transatlantic consensus on the appropriate division of labor between NATO and the EU. The debate between “Atlanticists” and “Europeanists” is as old as the Alliance itself and is yet to prevent NATO from functioning. But the divide still exists and remains an obstacle to NATO’s growing role in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere. A number of Europeans – in France, Belgium, Spain (under the government elected in spring 2004), and some in Germany – believe that an overly strong and active NATO is an impediment to the development of the European Union as a global political and strategic actor. In contrast to more “Atlanticist” NATO member states such as Britain, Italy, Poland and the Netherlands, they see the NATO–EU relationship as essentially competitive and want Europeans to have more control over their own fate than they would in the US-dominated NATO. Thus, on issues ranging from Sudan to Afghanistan and Iraq, proponents of a more active NATO role often run into opposition from those who would prefer to see the EU take the lead.

Again, divisions over the relative NATO and EU roles are neither new nor insurmountable—which is demonstrated by the fact that NATO is undertaking these new Greater Middle East missions. But the debate goes on, and the “balance of power” of the two schools can wax and wane.



On one hand, the new NATO members from Central and Eastern Europe are strongly Atlanticist, and few of the smaller members of the Alliance want to be dominated by France and Germany any more than by the United States, which is at least farther away. On the other hand, the more unpopular the Bush administration is in Europe, and the more Europeans there are who feel that they genuinely see the world in a different way to the United States (a view fuelled recently by the debates over the “war on terror”), the more support there will be in Europe for a separate and independent European defense force. NATO’s future thus depends on US leadership proving acceptable to a broad majority of the EU.

### **Military Capabilities**

Another major challenge for NATO, if it is to play a more significant role in the Greater Middle East – or anywhere else – is maintaining adequate military capabilities for the tasks at hand. Even with the operations in the Balkans winding down (last year NATO passed on responsibility for Bosnia primarily to the EU and hopes to reduce its forces in Kosovo this year), the growing missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere have stretched the Alliance’s military force to the limit—and perhaps even beyond it.

As well as almost 100,000 troops which it has stationed in Asia, the United States now has over 130,000 troops in Iraq and nearly 20,000 in Afghanistan. Washington hopes

that the growing NATO role will allow for some reductions in Afghanistan during the coming year or two, but the prospects for major withdrawal from Iraq are limited. Moreover, some US army and marine units are now beginning their third tour of duty in Iraq and Reserve and National Guard units have been used far more than plans allowed for, posing serious challenges for future military recruitment. As a result, US military forces are widely considered to be “overstretched” and the prospect of new troop deployments severely constrained.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of capability, however, the United States is not NATO's main problem. With a defense budget of more than \$400 billion annually, and military research, development and procurement spending which vastly exceeds that of all of its European allies combined, the United States can hardly be said to be failing to contribute an appropriate share of NATO's overall military power. The same can not be said for most of the European allies.

Collectively, NATO Europe spends about 45 percent of what the United States does on defense—or some \$175 billion. But even that disparity understates the difference, since the process through which Europe produces military power (via numerous separate defense budgets and bureaucracies) means that this money is spent less efficiently than in the United States. As a result, although Europe has more than 1.5 million men and women in its ground forces, it would be hard pressed to deploy and

sustain more than 6 percent of them abroad. In comparison, the United States can deploy and sustain some 62 percent of its ground forces.<sup>11</sup> Whereas some European countries – mainly Britain and France – have maintained defense expenditures at a level of around 2.5 percent of GDP, a number of others have allowed spending to fall considerably, with Italy now spending 1.8 percent, the Netherlands 1.6 percent, Germany 1.5 percent and Spain and Belgium barely above 1 percent.<sup>12</sup> Since September 11, 2001, defense spending as a share of GDP among non-US NATO allies has fallen from 2.02 percent to 1.8 percent, while the US share has risen from 3 percent to 3.7 percent.<sup>13</sup> As NATO's Supreme Allied Commander General James Jones has remarked, “most nations are slipping behind the ... gentleman's agreement [made at NATO's 2002 summit] in Prague. The 2 percent floor is becoming a ceiling.”<sup>14</sup>

These shortfalls have been apparent on the ground in some of NATO's missions. As discussed previously, ISAF forces in Afghanistan are starved for resources and are trying to make do with only a handful of helicopters and transport planes—in a massive country where ground transport is almost impossible. In Pakistan, NATO's earthquake relief mission was severely constrained by the lack of available air assets to deliver aid half-way around the world on short notice. In this sense, the debate about expanding NATO's future missions in the Greater Middle East is ironic, given

that the Alliance does not currently have the forces to undertake them.

Alliance members are, of course, trying to address the capabilities issue and are making some limited progress. One positive recent development – with potential relevance for the Middle East – was the agreement at the 2002 Warsaw summit to create a NATO Response Force (NRF). Upon reaching full operational capacity (scheduled for 2006), the NRF will include 25,000 troops, capable of deploying with five days' notice and sustaining themselves for up to 30 days (or longer if resupplied). It will include a brigade-sized land force, air assets capable of flying up to 200 combat sorties per day and maritime forces up to the size of NATO's standing naval forces (8–15 frigates and destroyers). The idea behind the NRF is to give the Alliance a standing capability to respond quickly to crises anywhere around the world on short notice. Possible missions could include evacuations, disaster management, counterterrorism and service as an “initial entry force” for larger, follow-on forces.

The NRF is composed of existing forces and in that sense does not represent additional defense resources. However, NATO's requirement that component forces of the NRF meet exacting standards of readiness has proven to be a useful tool in inspiring member states to meet those standards and therefore develop and fund the necessary forces. It is unlikely that the NRF will be used as an

integrated single unit involving troops from all NATO countries, but rather as a toolbox of highly ready components that Allied commanders can call upon at short notice for specific missions—such as the earthquake relief mission in Pakistan, that could not have been foreseen.

### **Skepticism in the Region**

Even if NATO is becoming increasingly ready for the Greater Middle East, it is unclear whether the Greater Middle East is ready for NATO. Indeed, for all the advantages to the West of operating collectively, ultimately NATO will not succeed in the region if the governments and peoples of the region do not want it to, and there are signs that NATO might not be any more welcome in the region than the United States is when acting alone.

In some cases, it is clear that NATO is welcome. The Pakistani government wanted as much help as possible with earthquake relief and asked NATO to contribute, while in Sudan the African Union is asking for NATO support. Several Gulf states have enthusiastically welcomed NATO's offer of more extensive political dialogue and in Afghanistan, the Karzai government values NATO's contribution, as apparently do many Afghan citizens.

But how far can this process go? If NATO undertook a role in enforcing a peace between Israelis and Palestinians, would the parties on the ground consider NATO an honest broker?

If NATO were to agree to an expanded role on the ground in Iraq, would it be any more acceptable to the insurgents than the current US-led coalition? If NATO ultimately replaces the United States in southern Afghanistan, will those currently fighting the US presence be any more tolerant of a NATO role—and if not, will NATO's European members have the staying power to persevere with the mission? Just because some in the Greater Middle East do not want NATO in the region does not mean that the Alliance should not, or will not continue to play a greater role, but NATO members would be naïve if they overlooked the potential resistance to their activities and if they did not work to convince residents of the region that a NATO role can be beneficial to them, as well as to NATO itself.

### *Conclusion*

Far from fading away into irrelevance after its original Cold War mission ended, NATO has proven remarkably resilient. Over the past several years, those in the US who believed that NATO was unnecessary – because the United States was powerful enough to accomplish its goals without having to compromise with nettlesome allies – have come around to accepting that a standing Alliance might actually be necessary after all. Also, many Europeans who thought that security was no longer an issue – or that the European Union could handle security challenges on its own – have also come around to the view that transatlantic security cooperation, particularly through

NATO, is still necessary. This mutual agreement on NATO's enduring utility has proven particularly relevant in the Greater Middle East, where NATO now finds itself conducting even more active missions on the ground than it was in Europe during the Cold War.

NATO's growing activity in the Greater Middle East should not, however, be surprising. The region remains beset by a wide range of security, humanitarian and developmental challenges, and it is still in the national interests of Europeans and North Americans to assist in dealing with them. Unilateral US approaches without European support lack legitimacy and resources, while European approaches without the United States lack unity and military credibility. NATO's growing activity in the Greater Middle East could fail and result in a transatlantic political crisis that would effectively end the Alliance. It is more likely, however, that NATO will continue – in fits and starts, and amidst endless internal debates – to play an ever greater role in the region.





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## NOTES

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1. The US defense budget for 2004 was over \$400 billion, which is more than the next 11 major defense spenders (Russia, China, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Italy, India, South Korea and Brazil) combined and represented 45% of total world defense spending. The projected US defense budget for 2007 is \$470 billion, which would be more than 50% of world spending—or more than all the other countries of the world put together. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2005–2006* (London: IISS, 2006). Also see Rowan Scarborough, “NATO Allies Cut Military Since 9/11,” *Washington Times*, February 15, 2006.
2. See Rumsfeld, cited in Vernon Loeb, “Rumsfeld Says War Will Need Backing of ‘Revolving Coalitions,’” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2001.
3. Briefing at ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, December 2005.
4. See Rumsfeld, quoted in “Secretary Rumsfeld Media Availability En Route to Poland,” US Department of Defense, News Transcript, September 22, 2002.
5. See Powell’s interview with Tony Snow, “Interview with Colin Powell,” *Fox News Sunday*, February 9, 2003, cited (along with other examples of American official criticism of NATO allies) in Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis Over Iraq* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), 138.
6. See Powell’s September 9, 2004 statement that “we concluded, I concluded, that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the Government of Sudan and the Jingaweit bear responsibility.” Secretary Colin L. Powell,

- Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, September 9, 2004.
7. See Madeleine Albright, Robin Cook, Lamberto Dini, et al., "NATO to Darfur: Letter from Former Foreign Ministers," *International Herald Tribune*, May 26, 2005.
  8. See Colum Lynch, "Official Pushes for UN Force in Sudan," *Washington Post*, January 14, 2006.
  9. For extended discussions of differing US and European attitudes toward foreign policy and the use of force, see Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*, (Knopf, 2004); and Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies at War*.
  10. For some details, see Michael O'Hanlon, "Nobody Wants a Draft but What if We Need One?" *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2004.
  11. See Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Expanding Global Military Capacity for Humanitarian Intervention* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 56. Figures are for the European members of NATO and refer to the ability to deploy the force in one to three months and to sustain it for a year.
  12. See the figures on defense spending in IISS, *The Military Balance 2005–2006* (London: 2006).
  13. Pentagon figures cited in Rowan Scarborough, "NATO Allies Cut Military Since 9/11," *Washington Times*, February 15, 2006.
  14. Jones cited in Daniel Dombey, "US NATO Chief Chides Europeans over Budgets," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2005.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Philip H. Gordon is Director of the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe and a Senior Fellow of its Foreign Policy Studies Program. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Board of the US Committee on NATO and the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Prior to his current position he was Director for European Affairs at the US National Security Council. From 1994–98 he was Senior Fellow for US Strategic Studies and the Editor of the journal *Survival* at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London. He has previously held teaching and research posts at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, DC; INSEAD, in Fontainebleau, France; and the German Society for Foreign Affairs in Bonn.

Dr. Gordon is a regular commentator on international affairs and US foreign policy for major television and radio networks, and newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *Financial Times*.

His recent publications include: *Crescent of Crisis: U.S. European Strategies in the Greater Middle East* (with Ivo Daalder and Nicole Gnesotto, Brookings, 2006) and *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis Over Iraq* (with Jeremy Shapiro, McGraw-Hill, 2004).



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