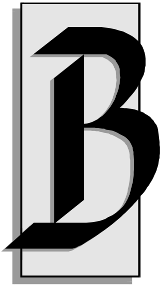

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NATO's Next Century

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During the 1990s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization showed that there was "life after the Cold War." Under American leadership and deriving inspiration from President George H.W. Bush's vision of creating a "Europe whole and free," the alliance recreated firm bonds across the Atlantic, in major part to complete the 20th century agenda of European security. The NATO allies invented the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the NATO-Ukraine Commission, and the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. They also transformed both the Alliance's military commands and forged a productive relationship with the Western European Union (now integrated into the European Union).

All these steps, together, underpinned the merging into NATO, as full members, of a number of countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain, while avoiding setting off a chain of events that might have led to yet another division of the Continent, a confrontation among states, or something worse. NATO successfully balanced the requirements of three geographic "zones of security"—Western Europe, Central Europe, and the Russian Federation. In the process—indeed, as a requirement of all else the Alliance sought to do—NATO took the lead in stopping two conflicts in the Balkans, in Bosnia and Kosovo, and in creating peacekeeping forces that have helped chart a path away from age-old grievances and toward productive futures.

The 20th century agenda of tasks required to create a Europe whole and free did not come to an end with the accession to NATO membership, on April 2, 2004, of seven more countries, including three that had been part of the old Soviet Union. But the architecture and the effort are clearly in place. And the end of one agenda begins another, a 21st century agenda, focusing on security problems of the Western allies that emanate from beyond Europe and marked, in particular, by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Can NATO be relevant to meeting the requirements of this new agenda? Indeed, is it even possible to talk of a common agenda among the allies, as was self-evident during the Cold War and, to a degree that was not widely expected, even during the 1990s?

PUSHING APART AND PULLING TOGETHER

There is no doubt that perceptions about security requirements embracing the Atlantic world and beyond—beginning in the Middle East—have been significantly different since "9/11." For the United States, the shock of 9/11 has led to a significant preoccupation with what in the United States is called the Global War on Terrorism; whereas, among most of the other allies, the phenomenon of terrorism has so far been seen as a lesser concern. Nevertheless, after 9/11 and during the war in Afghanistan, there was a significant coalescing of opinion on the issue of international terrorism within the Alliance.

This derived from many factors, including a sense among Europeans that they too could be vulnerable to increased Islamist-based terrorism and that injury to the United States could become injury to all if the United States lost faith in Europeans as partners and in NATO as a useful instrument of its security. Finally, many in Europe felt that, in view of all that the American people had done for European security in the 20th century, to stand aloof after 9/11 would be morally and politically unacceptable.

Nor has there proved since the Afghan War to be a significant division of opinion between the United States and its allies in regard to prosecuting the counter-terror war. Cooperation between the United States, Canada, and the Europeans has been significant on a wide range of essential activities, including intelligence sharing, police work, and border controls. In general, most of the allies do place a greater emphasis than does the United States on trying to deal with the causes of terrorism—or at least some of the bases for recruiting a new legion of terrorists—including problems of poverty and discontent. Most U.S. allies also put greater emphasis on resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict than the United States does. But none of these differences has prevented cooperation among the allies. Indeed, in Afghanistan, NATO has assumed responsibility for the International Security Assistance Force.

The real differences among allies relate to different parts of the U.S. government's post-9/11 agenda in the Middle East, namely the war in Iraq, concern about the possibility that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons, and the declared American ambition of transforming regional societies—in effect helping to create the long-term basis for the democratization and stability in the region. Here, divergences have already had a major impact, not just on the conduct of diplomacy, the conduct of the war in Iraq, and the conduct of many of the post-war efforts in Iraq and the surrounding region, but also on underlying understandings about a common security and political culture within the alliance and its continued cohesion.

Nevertheless, following the war, the allies, virtually without exception, are now faced with circumstances closer in terms of common challenge than has been true of any circumstances since the end of the Cold War. The war in Iraq shattered the existing system of security within the Middle East—whatever its virtues or inadequacies—and the United States and Europe have no choice but to put something effective in its place. Whether they like it or not, the allied countries on the two sides of the Atlantic must work to inhibit the spread of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, must do whatever is possible to prevent the growth of terrorism originating from the region, and must promote a "stable" form of government and society in Iraq.

They have to do these tasks even if they do not fulfill, at least any time soon, the hopes of U.S. policymakers and some Europeans for the creation of a democratic society in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East.

These common requirements do not necessarily mean comity within the Alliance. European governments generally would prefer a greater emphasis on not isolating Iran to the point of actually increasing the risks it will acquire nuclear weapons and on pursuing peace between Israel and Palestine. Indeed, active and sustained efforts to end this conflict have become imperative for all the allies, to a degree not true since the signing of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty in 1979. At one level, this is because the United States needs to gain the support of the allies for the rest of its Middle East agenda, and they have made American leadership in Israel-Palestine peacemaking a prerequisite for that support. At another level, Israeli-Palestinian peace is necessary to deprive Al-Qaeda of a potent recruiting tool.

As with the war on terrorism, however, the allies are not all that far apart, except in terms of the legacy of ill-will over the Iraq war and its early aftermath. Since that time, the U.S. government has begun to recognize that, in order to gain the support of other countries, it has to embed its diplomacy within some framework of UN-based legitimacy and also to share influence and decision-making as well as risks and responsibility.

THE SECOND TRANSFORMATION

At the same time, NATO has been going through its second great internal transformation since the end of the Cold War—the first to finish the 20th-century agenda, the second to get ready for the 21st century. This includes the reformulation of commands, and especially the inauguration of Allied Command Transformation, a provider not of military forces, as was done by its predecessor, Allied Command Atlantic, but of military modernization. It includes the new NATO Response Force to give NATO deployable and sustainable forces; the updating of Partnership for Peace; the lessening of institutional tensions between NATO and the EU's European Security and Defense Policy; and the creation of a new, PfP-like template both for the Mediterranean region and for the Persian Gulf. Along with NATO's assumption of ISAF responsibilities, devolving of responsibilities in Bosnia (now) and Kosovo (later) to the European Union, and growing engagement in regard to some aspects of Iraq's future (including training of military and other security forces), this is a formidable list of developments. Collectively, it means that NATO has not only managed to preserve essential elements of its character—including the unique integrated military command structure—but is now "ready and able" to act in many more places than before, if not yet everywhere "willing" to do so.

Notably, there has been no great concern about integrating new allies into the Alliance. In part, this demonstrates the success of PfP and related efforts. In part, it reflects the remarkable transformation of virtually all Central European countries, with a young generation showing all the signs of a "fresh start" both within individual countries and within the democratic community of nations. In part, it stems from a greater understanding that it will be possible to reach consensus on what really matters within a North Atlantic Council of 26 members as it was at

16—leadership, good sense, and focus on what is strategically most important are still the key ingredients. Finally, the ease of integration is evidence that the focus of security concerns has moved beyond Europe.

Of course, the vexing question of a shortfall in military capabilities on the part of most European allies has not been resolved. Afghanistan is a major test for NATO that it cannot fail. Sensibly, NATO's Prague Capabilities Commitment of 2002 replaced the original Defense Capabilities Initiative, with its laundry-list of unattainable goals, in favor of meeting the need for forces that can be deployed from here to there, sustained once they are there, and used in combination with forces of other countries. There is also a growing requirement for effective transatlantic defense cooperation, involving NATO militaries and defense industries. The United States needs to be more willing to share high technology; and the allies must be better able to protect that technology against diversion to third parties.

Even so, much of what needs to be done to promote the security of the allied states will not devolve upon NATO, but will be of a non-military nature. Indeed, in terms of promoting transatlantic security cooperation, there is less need for NATO to change and adapt than there is for creating a new U.S.-European Union strategic partnership. This partnership is only partly about military cooperation, including NATO's relations with ESDP. Even more, it needs to be about cooperation in the areas of health, education, development, and promotion of social, political, and economic change. The United States and the EU together dispose of more economic potential than any other combination of countries in the world. The United States and the European Union countries are all stable and democratic. They also possess a raft of cross-national or non-national corporations, non-governmental organizations, and politically aware citizens. This strategic partnership can and should become the next leap forward in more than a half-century of transatlantic cooperation.

Dramatized both by the war on terror and the demands of the Middle East and beyond, it has become increasingly obvious that responding to "security" needs cannot be any longer (if it ever were) the province of any one institution, even one as important and effective as NATO. The essence of today's challenges and the responses, the problems and the resolutions, requires a form of practical integration of each of the different instruments and each of the different institutions. This requires a new grand strategy and the leadership to pursue it.

Getting there also requires relearning that the NATO alliance (along with the broader transatlantic relationship) only works when it is greater than the sum of its parts. There needs, again, to be an instinctive acceptance, on the part of all the parties, that this relationship has a value to be preserved far beyond current interests and issues at stake. During the Cold War, such a values-based understanding was at least as important as the glue provided by Soviet and communist threat. This was also true in the 1990s, during NATO's first great transformation and its willingness to fight wars in Bosnia and Kosovo that had more to do with Western democratic values than with strategic interests. It must also be true in the post-9/11 era. So far, the Alliance has weathered the shocks of the Iraq war and aftermath. But preserving and extending that basic sense of "being in it altogether" is the most important task of alliance; it is the "without which nothing" that must be fully grasped and acted upon on both sides of the Atlantic.