

NATO Beyond Russia: Building a New Foundation for Transatlantic Relations

by

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Thank you for the kind introduction. I am honored to be participating in this 11th international conference on Russia/NATO relations. This is my first visit to Russia. I am particularly happy to be visiting the historic, beautiful and cold city of St. Petersburg.

I hope you will understand if I speak frankly about everything today. This includes US and European government policies, NATO and Russia. I do not work or speak for the US government, and, as you will hear, I will take advantage of the freedom that allows me.

Not too long ago, I participated in a conference on Russia/NATO relations in Ottawa, Canada. The paper I presented there was titled “NATO beyond Russia.”

My argument was that as a result of NATO’s post-Cold War enlargement and the evolving transformation of the missions and methods of the alliance, it could be said that NATO had moved “beyond Russia.” I suggested that Russia is no longer the primary security concern for the alliance, even though Russia’s evolution remains an important variable in Europe’s future.

The bottom line in my analysis of the NATO/Russia relationship was that NATO enlargement had troubled but not destroyed a cooperative relationship between the alliance and Russia – it did not lead to a “new cold war.” Political developments in Russia – with no connection to NATO’s enlargement process – have turned out to be far more important to the relationship than the addition of former Warsaw Pact allies and the Baltic Republics to the alliance.

Following President Putin’s remarks at last week’s Munich security conference, which some American participants described as “Cold War rhetoric,” I am wondering whether I was too optimistic. I hope not.

Russia’s future nonetheless remains critically important to the NATO allies. Neither the United States nor any European ally wishes to see Russia re-emerge as a challenge to Europe’s peace and stability.

NATO policies therefore have been designed to invite Russia’s constructive involvement in European and global security affairs. At the same time, NATO countries have critiqued Russia’s recent tendencies to reverse the process of liberalization that began after the Soviet Union was dissolved.

Russia’s apparent aspirations to derive political leverage from the growing European dependence on Russian energy sources now are a growing source of concern to Russia’s European neighbors and to the United States as well.

Looking to the West of Moscow, NATO has not been brought down by the process of enlargement and can still function as a framework for coordinating responses to the security needs of its members. This will remain true as long as the allies, and most importantly the United States, continue to believe that such cooperation is in their interest.

The biggest challenge to the alliance, therefore, is not Russian rhetoric or energy politics, nor even terrorism, Iraq, Iran or the Middle East more generally, but rather that of maintaining sufficient transatlantic cohesion to deal with these and other issues most effectively.

The recent NATO summit meeting in Riga provided an opportunity to assess how the alliance was handling this challenge.

When President Bush and his colleagues met in Riga, they congratulated themselves on the alliance's transformation and performance in Afghanistan. They acknowledged the important and growing role of NATO in international security, and pledged their commitment to the future of transatlantic security cooperation.

The veneer of success, however, did not hide the many issues clouding NATO's future.

The meeting trumpeted NATO's Response Force, which was declared fully operational, whether it is or is not ready to be thrown into the breach during the next international crisis.

The Response Force is the most visible token of NATO's transformation from an instrument of European security to a much more demanding international role.

But the force, composed mainly of European troops, may still be more a symbol of transatlantic security cooperation than a useable capacity.

Questions remain concerning how to finance operations, whether forces contributed by different nations are truly interoperable, and the big unknown: whether countries would actually send their promised forces when push came to shove.

Allied leaders at Riga commended each other for NATO having taken responsibility for the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This mission confronts violent Taliban and al Qaeda opposition.

The NATO-led coalition is trying to support a government that has been losing the trust of the people. The mission is seriously complicated by the fact of a poppy growing culture that supports the international drug trade while it underpins the Afghan economy.

NATO forces have registered some successes in dealing with Taliban and promoting development. But the force remains handicapped by limitations, referred to as "caveats," some NATO countries put on their participation.

For example, the forces of some allies cannot be used in the south and east of Afghanistan, where NATO faces the most violent opposition. These governments, in effect, are acting as if Afghanistan were a traditional peacekeeping operation rather than the peace enforcement counter-insurgency activity that it really is.

The NATO force, as a result, does not have the flexibility required for the difficult parallel tasks of providing security and enabling reconstruction. The Riga meeting produced some moderation in some of these constraints, but more needs to be done.

Stabilization of Afghanistan is likely to require outside military assistance for many years to come. At present, only NATO – with a strong US contribution – can provide this. However, public and parliamentary opinion in some allied nations raises doubts about their future participation in the operation.

The fact that the forces of some allies are in locations likely to produce casualties while others are less exposed could over time produce a divisive risk differential.

At Riga, the leaders took note of the role that NATO has played in training Iraqi security personnel. But the admirable NATO effort may look a bit like re-arranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic as Iraq's fledgling democracy is increasingly devoured by sectarian conflict, with officers that NATO trains perhaps ending up on opposite sides of the battle.

Moreover, differences over the original decision to go to war against Iraq, while somewhat muted by the passage of time, remain a source of division inside the alliance. This is true among and inside European governments as well as across the Atlantic. Perhaps most importantly, the entire affair has made US leadership less effective and credible at a time when it is most needed.

Riga summit declarations about the benefits of transatlantic security cooperation came against the backdrop of continued debilitating competition between NATO and the European Union. This is a duel fueled by the wish of some EU members to establish the Union's European Security and Defense Policy as a framework for "autonomous" European actions on defense – meaning free of US influence.

At the moment, a dispute involving Turkey and Cyprus has limited discussions between NATO and EU officials to questions related to Bosnia. They have not come close to developing joint approaches to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, or Afghanistan, where the EU's development assistance capabilities should logically be coordinated with NATO's security mission.

But France, Belgium and some elements in other EU governments, while prepared to accept NATO support for EU military operations, oppose putting the EU in a supporting role for a NATO operation.

In spite of all transatlantic problems, additional European states still aspire to membership in the alliance. The Riga summit came and went without issuing any new invitations to aspiring members.

At this point, only Croatia seems to have a clear claim on NATO membership. Candidates Albania and Macedonia do not appear to be on track for an invitation at next year's NATO summit.

Looking beyond Europe, the NATO leaders acknowledged the role that non-European democracies, such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, are playing in Afghanistan and in counter-terrorist efforts more generally. The summit leaders ordered a study of the options available for relations with these like-minded states.

These countries should be offered a special form of partnership with NATO to acknowledge their role and to facilitate additional assistance. While it is good news that these countries are willing to support such operations, the bad news is that NATO's move comes in part because the NATO countries have not been able to produce sufficient military forces and non-military resources required for success in Afghanistan.

The gap between summit declarations and on-the-ground realities does not suggest that NATO has outlived its utility.

The Bush administration has discovered that the United States needs allies, and not just on an ad hoc basis.

Many Europeans believe that European unity works best in partnership with the United States, even if most find close relations with the Bush administration a domestic liability.

NATO's military role has become an important part of the struggle against terrorism. But as NATO's Secretary General has acknowledged, the alliance does not have the mandate to handle some critically important parts of the Afghan situation, such as dealing with the poppy growing culture.

The transatlantic allies need more broadly-based cooperation to get at the roots and consequences of the current terrorist threat.

In part, malaise in the alliance reflects flawed US leadership. But it also illustrates the tendency of European governments to put a higher priority on the appearance of European unity than on the commitments required to deal with contemporary security problems. Without effective US leadership, and with a less than fully helpful European partner, the glass that the Riga summit proclaimed half full, can also be seen as half empty.

If the transatlantic alliance once again faces existential issues, do we need to rebuild the foundation for transatlantic cooperation and, if so, how?

My answer is that we do. And, the process of reconstructing a more trusting and productive US-European partnership should begin now.

I therefore will finish by suggesting some of the building blocks that, in my opinion, we will need for the construction.

First, the United States and its NATO allies must remain united against the sources of international terrorism.

This first building block is critical. The main sources of international terrorism today and in the foreseeable future are intent on undermining our values, destabilizing our societies, and ultimately destroying our way of life.

No country among us that treasures the values enunciated in the North Atlantic Treaty and the freedoms that we all hold dear is immune from attack.

The response needs to be a coordinated one, based on Western democratic values and utilizing the necessary policy tools – soft and hard – required to defend our interests.

Even during the US-European crisis over Iraq, there were some bright spots. Transatlantic counter-terrorism cooperation appears to have been quite robust, but it will have to get even better.

Second, NATO allies and non-NATO partners must remain committed to the missions in Afghanistan.

The US and NATO missions in Afghanistan are essential parts of the fight against international terrorism.

The Western role there is a critical test of whether or not we can help failed – or pre-emergent states, as Afghanistan might more appropriately be called – regain stable footing, even if we can't transform them into Western-style democracies.

The United States and its NATO allies may need to stay in Afghanistan for many years to ensure such stability.

And then, as we have seen in the 2006 parliamentary elections in Palestine, and as we may be discovering in Iraq, there is no guarantee that “democratic selection” of governments will ensure that peaceful and democratic regimes take root.

As we know, the Soviet Union held “elections” but by no means had a democratic system of government, with the rule of law and individual liberties that accompany such a system.

Third, the transatlantic allies should seek a strategic convergence on Iraq, Iran, and Middle East peace.

Given the history of US-European differences over how to deal with Middle Eastern issues, cooperation in the region may seem an unlikely building block for the future of the relationship. Divergent US and European approaches are based on different, and sometimes conflicted, histories in the region as well as on dissimilar contemporary perceptions.

While Europe prefers engagement with troublesome regimes in the region – an approach also supported by President Putin – the United States tends to favor isolation. We see it today in differing strategies concerning how best to deal with Iran. And, with regard to regime change, the United States has proven much more willing to use force to remove Middle Eastern despots.

Even though the United States and Europe bring different perspectives to the table, they each bring special strengths to these issues as well. They will achieve more working together than proceeding apart.

This is not a prediction that the United States and Europe will be able to rise to this challenge. It is a prediction that without such cooperation, US and European interests will suffer.

Fourth, it is also essential that the allies ensure a productive synergy in the relationship between NATO and the European Union.

In some ways, the most difficult challenge of all may be overcoming the inherent tension between transatlantic cooperation and European integration, a tension that has been with us for decades and, sorry to say, is alive and well today.

Progress has been made. Officials from the two organizations from time to time at least talk to one another. They have even managed to work together. The successful handoff of responsibilities from NATO to the European Union in Bosnia-Herzegovina was a good sign.

We will need continued positive synergy between the two organizations and their members to deal with terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Neither Europe nor the United States can afford wasteful competition between NATO and the European Union for the policy limelight.

Finally, the allies need to consider broadening the base for the transatlantic link, and extending it to include other like-minded democracies.

I have been arguing for several years that we need to broaden the base for the transatlantic relationship. Others have joined the chorus.

In 2005, in a speech delivered to the Munich security conference, former German Chancellor Schroeder called on the transatlantic allies to reinvigorate their strategic cooperation.

The US Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, has set the goal of NATO and the EU working together, at the heart of a “global community of democracies.”

Late last year, the prestigious Princeton University Project on National Security recommended that the United States “revive the NATO alliance by updating its grand bargains and expanding its international partnerships...”

The project authors also suggested “the United States should work with its friends and allies to develop a global “Concert of Democracies” – a new institution designed to strengthen security cooperation among the world’s liberal democracies.”

In my judgment, contemporary security requirements suggest that NATO remains absolutely necessary, but not sufficient, for the security needs of the United States, Canada and Europe.

Politically, I believe we will need a major initiative to help restore mutual confidence in the alliance.

Functionally, I believe that we need a broader cooperative framework for security, one that includes all NATO and EU members and which concentrates on all areas of non-military cooperation.

To this end, I believe the Euro-Atlantic democracies should prepare a New Atlantic Community Treaty to be signed by all NATO and EU members.

The treaty would create an Atlantic Community Treaty Organization for non-military security cooperation that would complement, not compete with, NATO and the EU.

Once in operation, the signatories should open the treaty to all non-European democracies that might wish to participate in such non-military security cooperation. Countries like Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea seem logical additional members, but there may be others as well.

Russia, Ukraine and other states might qualify for membership somewhere down the road. When they can meet the democratic standards met by current members of the transatlantic alliance and the European Union, they should be welcomed.

At the end of the day, there are two basic requirements for the transatlantic relationship to be perceived as important enough for the member states to ensure its survival. Put most simply, the United States must be convinced that political and military cooperation with the European allies makes an important net contribution to US interests.

Europeans, for their part, must believe that contributing to international security efforts alongside the United States will produce influence for Europe over US decisions that affect their security. These are the fundamental self-interested terms for continuation of a vital, productive transatlantic bargain that has moved beyond Russia. I sincerely hope that Russia can some day become a full partner in this undertaking.

Thank you for listening patiently. I look forward to our discussion of these important issues.