

NATO Summit: Forward-looking Decisions, Difficult Implementation

Other Publication**Author(s):**

Mauer, Victor

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NATO SUMMIT: FORWARD-LOOKING DECISIONS, DIFFICULT IMPLEMENTATION

At their meeting in Lisbon, the heads of state and government of NATO members not only approved a new Strategic Concept, but also passed seminal decisions on a missile defence capability for the entire alliance, on partnership with Russia, and on the future of the engagement in Afghanistan. Since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent transformation of the international system, no NATO summit has demonstrated a comparable degree of internal unity and outward determination. The programme is an exceptionally ambitious one. This is precisely why it is in danger of failing in the mid- to long-term.



NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen presents the new Strategic Concept. Lisbon, 19 November 2010. *Image: NATO*

The voices of those who had intermittently questioned the continued *raison d'être* of the Atlantic Alliance since the watershed events of 1989/90 have by now fallen almost completely silent. For NATO, more than almost any other comparable multilateral organisation, has completed a process of fundamental adaptation in recent decades. This change can be attributed to two factors: the expanding risk spectrum and alliance members' fear of their own failure.

At first glance, the NATO summit in Lisbon has stemmed the rift within the al-

liance that had become noticeable in recent years. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the 28 heads of state and government have approved a new Strategic Concept that lays down the alliance's guidelines for the coming years. While the Strategic Concept is phrased as succinctly as it is forward-looking and was approved with an appropriate show of internal unity and external determination, the allies have also succeeded in moving towards at least declaratory resolution of some of the questions that were most controversial within the alliance in recent years. This is true for the

innovative development of a ballistic missile defence system (cf. CSS Analysis no. 86), for the withdrawal plans for Afghanistan, which are motivated by domestic policy concerns on both sides of the Atlantic, and for the prospect of attributing special status to the partnership with Russia after several failed attempts. The main challenge therefore seems to be not so much the fundamental compatibility of seemingly divergent positions in matters of alliance policy, but rather mustering the determination to implement the ambitious goals that the alliance has set itself in the coming years.

Difficult conditions

The approved document is the alliance's third Strategic Concept since the end of the East-West conflict. The first was agreed in 1991 during a transitional phase marked by insecurity, as the alliance carefully manoeuvred through an uncertain post-Cold War period. In the midst of the Kosovo War, the 1999 anniversary summit in Washington approved a far-reaching and nevertheless Eurocentric concept: on the one hand, the focus shifted to the lessons of the Balkan wars, and thus to the challenges facing Euro-Atlantic crisis management. On the other hand, the Clinton administration pressured the European allies to concede a global role for NATO – based on the systematic buildup and expansion of

military capabilities and a transatlantic burden-sharing. To this extent, the alliance's first round of Eastern expansion in 1999 competed to some extent with the more far-reaching US plans. For old alliance members, this expansion served as a policy measure transferring stability within the Euro-Atlantic space, while newer members regarded it primarily as a security guarantee against Russia. Almost at the same time, the European Union undertook to build up its own European Security and Defence Policy, designed primarily to ensure security and stability on its own continent. The long-term nature of this move could also be perceived as an argument in favour of NATO taking on a *global* role to defend Euro-Atlantic security interests.

The framework for elaborating a new Strategic Concept changed fundamentally in the first decade of the 21st century. First of all, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 brought about a military engagement by NATO in Afghanistan that has constantly increased both quantitatively and qualitatively over the years, and thus tacitly actualized American aims for the alliance despite many allies being unprepared for the asymmetric nature of the conflict. Their participation was the result both of intra-alliance solidarity and of the belief that what they were agreeing to was essentially a stabilisation mission comparable to those conducted on the Balkans.

Secondly, the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 caused a fundamental rift in transatlantic relations, the long-term effects of which are still being felt in relations between Europe and the US, irrespective of the change in the White House. Third, disagreements on strategy became obvious. These are best described as reflections of multiple tiers within the alliance: Eastern European preferences for collective defence, German-French advocacy of collective (regional) security, and the Anglo-Saxon preference for globalising NATO. Fourth, in the face of a grave economic and financial crisis that casts the power shift from West to East in particularly stark relief, several European allies are subjecting their defence budgets to more or less rigorous savings programmes.

Active engagement *and* modern defence

Against this background, the new NATO secretary general and former Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was tasked at the anniversary summit of Strasbourg and Kehl in 2009 with elaborating the new Strategic Concept. Never before in the history of the alliance has there been a similarly open *and* public consultation process that took into account the various approaches of alliance partners. Nevertheless, Rasmussen has managed to present an internally coherent program that avoids emulating the 1999 document's vagueness and that of the report developed by the "NATO 2020" expert group led by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, while seemingly reconciling conflicting interests of member states. The alliance remains committed to three core tasks: collective defence, comprehensive crisis management, and cooperative security.

While the Strategic Concept follows the wishes of Eastern European members by emphasising collective defence as the essence of the alliance, without limiting the concept of defence to classic territorial defence, the simultaneous call for a strategic partnership with Russia reflects Western European preferences. It is because of these considerations that the summit avoided further elaborating on the question of expansion, although the alliance continues to maintain its basic open-door policy.

The commitment to nuclear disarmament, which reflects a special concern on the part of Germany, is complemented by a continued adherence to nuclear deterrence that France had described as indispensable ahead of the summit. In addition to the essentially global projection of military power for crisis management, which the US had been advocating for years, there is also the awareness of being not a global policeman, but part of a global security network of civilian and military partners, as many European states had demanded. Furthermore, if the construction of a shared system for defending the alliance's territory against ballistic missiles had been a longstand-

ing demand of the US, the focus on new threats that has featured in national strategy documents on security policy for some time (nuclear proliferation, terrorism, regional conflicts, cyberattacks, hazards for international transport and transit routes, etc.) is welcomed by all partners.

When it comes to identifying and defending against some of the new threats, the alliance is on shaky ground. This is especially true for the question of militarising cyberspace. There is no question that due to limitations on their own resources, smaller member states in particular are dependent on international cooperation for civilian and military cybersecurity. Estonia, for instance, was subjected to a series of cyberattacks in 2007. However, the tendency to exaggerate such threats especially in the military context has been increasing in recent years. It is often forgotten that cyberattacks are always immediately linked to other conflicts, that the source of an attack can only rarely be clearly identified, and that for these reasons, there are good grounds for the advice of some member states not to include defence against cyberattacks as a case for mutual defence under Article V.

Lingering issues

Three further fundamental decisions made at the summit will require explicit clarification in the coming months. First of all, the concrete design of the shared alliance-wide missile defence system, which is a *prima facie* expression of distrust in the power of nuclear deterrence, remains unresolved, as does the matter of command and control over the system (cf. CSS Analysis no. 86).

Secondly, there is the correlated question of how the relationship with Russia can be placed on a long-term sustainable basis as a way of resolving the security dilemma that is felt at least to some extent by both sides. The call for a strategic partnership between the Atlantic Alliance and Russia has been heard since the end of the East-West conflict. The bitter disputes over NATO expansion in the second half of the 1990s, the Kosovo War in 1999, and the Georgia War in 2008, however, doomed to failure all efforts at improving relations. The fourth

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attempt, which is predicated on the belief that both sides are dependent on one another – whether in the broader context of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, or in the concrete case of the Afghanistan mission – will likely soon be subjected to a twofold test. Unless US President Barack Obama manages to win approval for the START Treaty in the US Congress in the coming weeks, it is not only the reputation of the US as a reliable negotiating partner that will suffer; the efforts of the alliance to integrate Russia into the alliance-wide missile defence architecture will then most likely have failed prematurely. But even if the new START Treaty is ratified, it is not yet clear how Russia can be integrated into the alliance project as a partner with equal decisionmaking power. Finally, it remains unclear what consequences a strategic partnership between Russia and NATO would have, both for the structure of the alliance and for external emerging powers.

Third, the plan for withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is mainly motivated by domestic political considerations and is also intended to remind local decision-makers of their own responsibility, will cause internal controversies within the alliance. The ISAF mission, which was originally planned as purely a stabilisation mission, has since become the alliance's longest combat mission. Irrespective of the fact that the exit strategy will be welcomed with relief in all capitals, it is questionable whether the envisaged withdrawal of all combat troops by 2014 is realistic. This is exactly why in three years at the latest, the question will arise as to which countries are prepared to support the insufficiently trained Afghan armed forces in their efforts to ensure security and stability.

Transatlantic challenges

The NATO mission in Afghanistan will certainly not lead to the failure, let alone the dissolution of the alliance. However, more than any other mission in the past years, it has cruelly exposed the discrepancy between political intentions on the one hand and practical implementation on the other. Thus, NATO's new Strategic Concept can also be seen as a renewed attempt to reconcile goals and means. The attempt has been a conceptual success, but its practical implementation depends more than ever on the determination and capabilities of the European member states.

It should come as no surprise if the other, largely ignored aspect of this meeting of heads of state and government were to dominate in the middle-to-long term: from the basic points of the Strategic Concept to missile defence, the US has impressively asserted its leadership claim. This leadership claim is expected by the Eastern European and smaller alliance members and certainly not just tolerated by the greater ones, even though occasionally the opposite might appear to be true. After all, the US leadership role allows the Europeans to acquire external security guarantees at a relatively affordable cost.

However, a perpetuation of this unequal distribution of burdens is just what the Strategic Concept does not envisage. Nevertheless, there are few indications that the majority of European member states will be prepared to close the transatlantic military capability gap that has once again expanded noticeably in the past ten years. The dispute is not even over the absolute numbers involved in defence budgets, which in sum are still far above those of China and Russia, but over the way these limited funds are allocated. More than ten years after the establishment of an independent defence and security policy, and irrespective of initial progress, the EU still maintains an unnecessary degree of multiplication with its 21 naval shipyards, 89 weapons programmes, and 11 tank programmes, while specialisation of roles often remains an unfamiliar concept. It is questionable whether the imminent or already announced cutbacks in European defence

budgets can serve to catalyse a fundamental modernisation of the European arms industry.

Outlook

There are four essential conclusions for the Atlantic alliance. First of all, NATO will hardly be able to maintain its current level of ambition. However, the essence of the transatlantic security partnership will remain intact. Secondly, while the US can use the alliance as an instrument for exerting influence, and thus prevent the emergence of an independent power centre that might be directed against it, the alliance serves the Europeans as a transatlantic insurance against external threats, while the US balances internal European disagreements. Third, almost inevitably, this means that the EU as an independent security actor must ultimately yield to NATO even within Europe. And finally, as a lead nation in security policy, the US – which regards itself more and more as a Pacific power – will increasingly take recourse to other states, groups of states, and coalitions of the willing to promote its interests globally.

“NATO will hardly be able to maintain its current level of ambition.”

Key documents for the NATO summit in Lisbon

- ▮ [Strategic Concept: Active Engagement, Modern Defence](#)
- ▮ [NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement](#)
- ▮ [Lisbon Summit Declaration](#)
- ▮ [NATO-Russia Council Joint Statement](#)
- ▮ [Declaration by the Heads of State and Government of the Nations contributing to the UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\) in Afghanistan](#)

- ▮ Author: Victor Mauer mauer@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
- ▮ Responsible editor: Daniel Trachsler sta@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
- ▮ Translated from German: Christopher Findlay
- ▮ Other CSS Analyses / Mailinglist: www.sta.ethz.ch
- ▮ German and French versions: www.ssn.ethz.ch