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STRATEGIC ADVISORS GROUP

Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO's Strategic Concept: Ignore, Finesse or Confront?

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is overseeing the drafting of NATO's latest Strategic Concept, set to replace the current version approved in 1999. Even though only a decade has passed, changes across the globe have been stunning and in some cases revolutionary. For NATO, we believe the challenge of the Strategic Concept is to address the question of whether NATO is still relevant or whether it has become a relic. We strongly believe the former. However, that can no longer be taken for granted. Twenty years after the Soviet Union imploded, the Alliance must finally find a new strategic anchor for its *raison d'être* or deal with the implications of becoming a relic or an Alliance that may have served its purpose.

In that regard Afghanistan and by extension Pakistan play critical roles. It is self-evident that the future of the Alliance very much hangs in the balance over how the conflict in Afghanistan is resolved. After all, NATO has become more expeditionary and designed to operate "out of area." Afghanistan is THE test case for this proposition.

"Victory," however – defined as NATO action leading to a more secure and more stable Afghanistan – will give the Alliance a huge political boost. "Failure," meaning that NATO cannot bring stability and security to Afghanistan, could, and we repeat *could*, pose a profound danger to Alliance cohesion and integrity. But make no mistake: what happens in Afghanistan is almost certainly going to have a profound impact on the Alliance and its future.

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The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft and former Norwegian Minister of Defense Kristin Krohn Devold, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

The SAG and its activities are generously sponsored by the Scowcroft Group, EADS North America, and Airbus.

Hence, a key question is how the Strategic Concept should deal with Afghanistan, if at all. Clearly, there are three options: ignore and defer; finesse; and confront. This brief analyzes each option and proposes a way ahead.

Ignore and Defer

While NATO forces are fighting in Afghanistan, the Strategic Concept could focus on the future and a time when NATO will not be so engaged in combat. Interestingly, as the Vietnam War drew down, the then-President of the U.S. Naval War College, Admiral Stansfield Turner, made the decision not to include study of that war in the curriculum on the grounds that it was too emotional and too recent to warrant objective study. The Strategic Concept could make a similar presumption.

The advantage of this “ignore and defer” approach would be to eliminate the obvious strains in the Alliance over Afghanistan and the role of expeditionary capability. But the disadvantages in deferring any consideration of Afghanistan are more numerous and we believe more powerful. The major disadvantage of deferral is the obvious reality that many or most of the threats and dangers to NATO emanate from “out of area.” The shift to more expeditionary-like force structure and capability has been a logical conclusion. To ignore these realities by dismissing Afghanistan will prove short-sighted. Yet, the attraction of this option, albeit tactical in essence, exists and could be seen as doing the least political damage to the Alliance at present.

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Second, during the last decade, defense and security have shifted from protection of national sovereignty from direct or threatened use of military force to respond to more nontraditional and indirect threats, including the protection of individuals. And war has morphed such that conflict is now about non-state actors and people and not about destroying conventional armies, navies and air forces. Afghanistan and Iraq post-invasion are classic examples to make this point. If NATO is fixated mainly on territorial

defense or on forces designed to defend national borders, it is living in a distant past. Even a rejuvenated and hostile Russia is unlikely to present a real military threat for some time to come, if at all. Indeed, energy is a far more potent point of potential leverage for Moscow.

Third, as long as the use of terror in an era of capacities for mass disruption remains a threat, NATO cannot ignore it. Homegrown terrorists are real. The attacks in London in 2005, Madrid in 2004 and more recently in the United States last year on Christmas Day underscore this reality. However, the breeding grounds are the Internet and unsettled regions such as Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and, of course, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. NATO thus has a much broader, if not global, vista.

Of course, because failure in Afghanistan could potentially pose an existential or at least very serious threat to Alliance credibility, cohesion and its future viability, the allies could defer or ignore that conflict in developing the new Strategic Concept. This ostrich-like position could be one of default. Of all the options, however, we believe this one is the least desirable and potentially the most reckless. After all, to NATO publics, how can NATO be engaged in Afghanistan and make no mention of it in its first strategic review in over a decade?

Finesse

That said, as the most unfortunate development, NATO nations could choose to follow the path of least resistance, as they have done in the recent past. In this case, that would mean finessing Afghanistan in developing the new Strategic Concept. One way to do this is to focus on “lessons learned” or a narrower slice of the conflict and incorporate that into the concept. For example, in laying out future capabilities and strategic direction, phrases such as “NATO must be prepared for both conventional and asymmetric or ‘hybrid’ forms of conflict” could be used. From there, specific “lessons learned” about tactics, logistics, strategic communications and doctrine can be drawn. As a result, Afghanistan would be raised in a seemingly central way. But in fact the fundamental issues of where, when or how NATO might next intervene in similar scenarios and the whole matter of expeditionary capability is left for other venues.

We fully appreciate the attractiveness of this approach. While far better than “ignore and defer,” at some stage, the Alliance must come to grips with the question of whether it is relevant or a relic of a past era. With 28 members and the requirement for consensus, making major change absent a powerful or even overwhelming reason to do so is by definition a formidable task. That this was done in 1968 following the Harmel Report, the shift to MC 14/3 and the strategy of “flexible response” was because of direct response to a combination of growing Soviet conventional and nuclear strength underscored by the brutal repression in Czechoslovakia and then Poland. No such forcing function exists today.

Confront

While the operations in Afghanistan are being conducted under Article 4, not Article 5, of the Washington Treaty – meaning this campaign was not declared as a response to an attack on any member – it is the first sustained ground operation in NATO’s history. Very few of the citizens of member states are unaware of this conflict, especially as casualties mount. And many publics are divided, if not opposed, to fighting in Afghanistan, as they have not been convinced of the rationale behind the mission and have not been given any definition of victory. This opposition is likely to build as casualties mount and the Karzai government continues along a path of incompetence, nepotism and corruption.

Further, much of NATO’s future rests in the outcome. If NATO is successful in Afghanistan, will it rest on its laurels and say never again? Or will it prepare for future conflicts that will be “irregular” or asymmetric in nature and require non-military solutions to achieve success?

If NATO does not succeed in Afghanistan, will that make the Alliance moribund or even unravel it? Will the Alliance regroup, lick its wounds and determine where and how it has a future? Or will the significant political and military experience derived from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation be wasted and the valuable practical lessons being learned, both in terms of the utility and setbacks in using military power to achieve political objectives, be ignored?

No matter what the Alliance chooses or does, it seems that its future is inextricably linked with Afghanistan.

Not confronting Afghanistan as an important aspect of the Strategic Concept would be irresponsible and even foolish.

That said, the question is whether or not NATO members have the stomach and the resolve to confront Afghanistan frontally. Given the difficulty in gaining consensus on new missions or possible tasks such as energy and cyber security; proliferation; infrastructure protection and resilience; terrorism; piracy; instability; and a host of other well-known issues, coming up with a way of dealing with Afghanistan may simply be in the “bridge-too-far” category.

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What to Do

We believe and argue that the Strategic Concept is the venue for a serious, searching, rigorous and honest assessment of NATO and its future, examining not merely Afghanistan, but the range of issues that confront the Alliance from consensus, expansion, out of area, burden-sharing, reform, Russia and the litany of issues that pressure NATO to move from a defensive military alliance to one based on the broader basis of security. We also recognize that there are four or five distinctly different points of view among the members over threats and roles. Concern or even fear of Russia motivates many of the newer members. Others view expeditionary and out of area responsibilities, as well as broader security responsibilities, as pressing and of growing importance. A third group prefers to keep its powder dry and considers the Alliance an insurance policy. Others are uncertain or care less.

Cutting across all members, however, is the fiscal Damoclean sword. Outside the United States and France, defense capacity will contract and probably substantially. The economic outlook is not good and people are more concerned understandably with domestic

and not international problems. This is not a 21st century variant of isolationism. Ironically, globalization has made more people more conscious of international events and realities especially in business and trade.

The simple and perhaps naïve conclusion is that NATO needs (and may lack) powerful leadership. This is beyond the pay grade of even the most dynamic Secretary General or the strategic commanders and Chairman of the Military Committee. It is up to the political elites in allied states and their heads of state and government.

This year's World Economic Forum at Davos had an interesting subtext. Many of the non-U.S. participants took for granted or concluded that the United States was simply not the power or force it once was. Perhaps that was because the U.S. delegation was not as senior as it had been in the past and was guarded in making comments that could be seen as provocative or debate-worthy. Given the Obama administration's current focus on the economy and domestic issues, such a posture is understandable. However, if it is symptomatic or a precursor of things to come, it is difficult to envision where real leadership will come from. (As an aside, in the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), NATO is not mentioned until page 54, something that will not go unnoticed abroad.) Despite numerous trips to Europe, the decision by President Obama not to participate in a U.S.-EU Summit in Spain, as

STRATCON 2010

The Strategic Advisors Group's STRATCON 2010 project seeks to shape and inform the transatlantic debate over NATO's new Strategic Concept. STRATCON 2010 will issue publications to define the critical issues NATO must confront in drafting a new Strategic Concept. For more information about the SAG or STRATCON 2010, please contact Vice President and Director of the Program on International Security Damon Wilson at dwilson@acus.org or Program Associate Director Jeff Lightfoot at jlightfoot@acus.org.

seen by many Europeans, will not contribute to a stronger transatlantic relationship, so much needed for a meaningful NATO Strategic Concept.

Hence, **our plea is for strong and united leadership at the heads of state and government level for a Strategic Concept that has the courage and substance to examine all of the key issues confronting the Alliance.**

That concept may not be able to resolve all or even some of them. But now is the time for the Alliance to be honest and assess the present and the future without precondition.

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