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Following the Chicago Summit: NATO between Afghanistan and Syria

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On May 20, 2012, at the end of their meeting in Chicago, the leaders of NATO member nations published a statement whose formulation downplayed a host of unresolved problems that have ramifications for the organization's future. The nature of summit meetings is such that concluding declarations do not dwell on disagreements any more than necessary. This was especially true of the Chicago summit, which had to end with a demonstration of unity given that the meeting was supposed to help Obama's reelection campaign.

At the previous summit in Lisbon (2010), the leaders adopted a document called "The Strategic Concept" (see *Insight* Nr.226 from November 2010), which was intended to steer the organization's activities in the years to come. Since the Lisbon summit, several developments have taken place that have (and will have) implications on NATO's activities. In this context, one should note the worsening of the economic-financial crisis affecting the United States and the European Union whose results are being felt – and will continue to be felt even more profoundly in the future – in further cuts in the defense budgets of NATO members. The Arab Spring represented a historic event, one of whose manifestations being NATO's direct involvement in the toppling of Gaddafi and his regime.

What are the key problems facing NATO? What are the threats it faces and what are its chances of confronting them successfully?

The end of military activity in Afghanistan and the subsequent period President Obama's decision (which was greeted with support in Lisbon) to end the fighting and withdraw combat forces by the end of 2014 constitutes an admission of the failure of the United States (and NATO) to realize its ambitious goal of transforming Afghani society and the regime. After setting more limited, seemingly attainable goals, Obama was able to announce the withdrawal of troops by the end of 2014. The background of the president's decision is the economic crisis (and consequently the need to make drastic cuts in military spending) and the fatigue of American society with war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the chance that the Afghani army can effectively control the entire territory within the nation's borders is slim, one may assume that, in order to retain the limited achievements, the United States and its NATO allies, as well as other nations, will have to continue the fighting (which will not necessitate a

permanent presence). To realize this mission, the United States needs help. Its request of NATO and other partners to help with the financial burden has yet to receive a full response. Former NATO Director General Lord George Robertson once said that the future of NATO would be determined in Afghanistan. It is too early to assess the scope of NATO's success or failure there; even if the organization for now has managed to deal with Al Qaeda, its battle against the Taliban cannot be called a success. Add to this the question of Pakistan, key to stabilizing Afghanistan and various interests of neighboring countries (Iran et al.). All of these call NATO's success into question. Whatever military lessons will be learned from the involvement in Afghanistan, it is clear that NATO's image of omnipotence has been damaged. Although the lesson-learning stage has yet to come, it is obvious that no involvement on the same scale may be expected in the coming years.

Involvement in Libya To judge NATO's involvement in Libya by its outcome, NATO fulfilled the mission: It successfully ousted Gaddafi and his regime. Nonetheless, on the way to success a number of problems came to light that detract from the achievement. Sarkozy's (and the British prime minister's) independent action, absent prior coordination with either EU or NATO members, presented both organizations with a done deal. Later on there were disagreements within NATO about the involvement itself, which ended with a German abstention in the UN Security Council and the partial participation of NATO in the military mission (only fourteen took part in the effort, and only eight participated in the fighting). Those who participated were missing combat equipment and resources, again exposing the dependence on American capabilities. The EU proved its incompetence in handling military operations. Furthermore, the American decision on a new mode of involvement ("leading from behind") raises the question of whether this was an ad hoc decision or the beginning of a change in how the United States views its involvement in handling crises in the future. In parentheses, we should mention that if this portends a change, it may allow the European members to strengthen the security aspect of the treaty, an issue that France had already raised as a precondition for full return to the organization. It is doubtful if the Europeans, against the backdrop of the economic-financial crisis, will advance the above-mentioned goal.

The Syrian crisis So far, NATO leaders have sufficed with expressions of concern, support for implementing the UN plan to solve the ongoing crisis, and the clarification that the organization has no intention of getting involved militarily. Even though some in the organization view NATO action in Libya as successful and as a possible model for the future, there is still a great deal of doubt if it will ever be possible to look to the military model of Libya again (assuming that the political circumstances reach the point of deciding on military involvement).

Relations with Russia The decision by President Putin to absent himself from the summit is symptomatic of the relations between Russia and NATO, accompanied as they are by Russian suspicions about NATO's true intentions. The recent pretext for increased suspiciousness is the Ballistic Missile Defense (the conclusion of its first stage was announced in Chicago), unfairly viewed as a threat to Russia's nuclear deterrence. Given that politics rather than a discussion of technicalities lends a crisis its tone, as long as there is no change in the general atmosphere of US-Russian relations one may assume that no resolution to the problem will be found.

Cooperation with partners The military campaigns in Afghanistan and Libya, which highlighted NATO's limits, also highlighted the importance of assistance from non-member nations. Cooperation will increase as the organization continues to face challenges in the next few years. It is important to deepen and formalize the connections in the context of the discussion about the organization's geographical sphere of activity. A decision to include activity outside of NATO's geographical sphere makes the deepening and formalization of such connections especially critical when it comes to the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. Will NATO's intervention in Libya cause a positive change in the suspicious attitude on the part of Arab nations that makes it difficult to deepen the Mediterranean dialogue? Time will tell. NATO's willingness to start a new page, in the context of the "Arab Awakening," with partner states in the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Gulf states (in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) was reflected in the Chicago document. Even if Israel were keen on responding to NATO's call to show a "proactive" attitude (to use the formulation of the Chicago document), the crisis in relations with Turkey has in recent years curbed any possibility of expanding bilateral cooperation. The principle of decision-making by consensus will not allow any progress until the crisis is resolved. Opening an information center in Kuwait (as part of the Istanbul initiative) will help NATO in the Gulf in the context of the crisis with Iran, which formally is not a topic on the organization's agenda.

Sharing the burden The economic-financial crisis that will lead to significant cuts in U.S. defense spending in the next few years and also to cuts in America's military presence in Europe again raised the question of sharing the burden. One may be skeptical about whether outgoing Secretary of Defense Gates' rousing call and similar statements by his successor about the need to redress the asymmetry of the burden will lead the European nations significantly to expand their portion of the budget. An attempt to confront the difficult budgetary reality while not damaging the capabilities of the treaty was reflected by two terms that were bandied about: "smart defense" and "pooling and sharing." Translating these into practice is problematic because of the political, legal, economic and budgetary aspects inherent in their application.

More than two decades have passed since the end of the Cold War, and NATO continues to search for a rationale for its continued existence. The two big "enemies" of the treaty, as it tries to maintain its relevance in a changing international reality, are the lack of a clearly defined threat regarding which there is a consensus and willingness to sacrifice, and an economic crisis, one of whose manifestations is a change in national priorities and consequently also deep cuts to defense budgets. In the absence of answers to these questions, the organization will have to continue to fumble and struggle for its right to exist.