

Contents

1. From Riga to Bucharest	2
2. NATO in Afghanistan	2
3. The NATO Response Force	3
4. The Future of NATO Enlargement	4
5. Global Partnership	4
6. The NATO-EU Relationship	5
7. A New Strategic Concept	6
8. The Reintegration of France into NATO	6
9. Conclusions	7
2004-2007 NDC Research Papers	8



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The NATO Summit in Bucharest: The Alliance at a Crossroads

by Karl-Heinz KAMP¹

In the past, NATO summits took place at most every two years. In 2008 and 2009, the Alliance will break with this trend by holding two of these important gatherings. This is attributable less to a glut of fundamental decisions requiring urgent approval from heads of state and government than to the international political calendar. Washington pushed for a summit in early 2008 to enable departing President George W. Bush to have a last meeting with NATO leaders during his time in office. This summit will take place in Bucharest in April 2008, even though the last NATO Summit in Riga was held in November 2006, less than 18 months earlier. Another NATO Summit is planned for 2009 — likely in Berlin — to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the North Atlantic Alliance.

- Which questions will dominate the April 2008 summit in the Romanian capital?
- What decisions must be made?
- Which of the major issues facing the Alliance will be on the table?

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The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and should not be attributed to the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

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1. From Riga to Bucharest

Though the 2006 NATO Summit in Riga attracted significant media attention, its results were generally viewed as rather modest. Even in the run-up to the conference some called it a “summit in search of a reason”. The Alliance had trouble even finding themes worthy of a meeting of heads of states and governments. At the summit itself, many issues were omitted, resolved with “lowest common denominator” language, or subtly deferred.

The preparations currently underway in advance of the coming meeting in Bucharest differ measurably from the situation in 2006. The omissions of Riga left critical questions unaddressed—questions NATO can no longer avoid, and for which common positions must be found. Other issues raised by recent developments, such as the situation in Kosovo, could have very serious long-term consequences.

Even leaving aside such currently irresolvable questions (whether Kosovo will be high on the agenda will depend on future developments), decisions must be made at the Bucharest summit in at least seven key areas: Afghanistan, NATO enlargement, the idea of a “Global Partnership,” the NATO Response Force, the relationship between NATO and the EU, the new Strategic Concept, and the possible reintegration of France into the Alliance. Taken together, this list adds up to a general query about the future course of the Alliance.

2. NATO in Afghanistan

As in Riga, the 2008 Bucharest Summit will be a “war summit.” NATO commands a combat force of around 35,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, and is thereby engaged for the first time in its history in a combat deployment with ground troops. The duty of assistance to a NATO partner under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which was activated after the September 11 attacks on the United States but not used by the Bush administration, remains in force. The Alliance’s leading power, the United States, still sees itself as at war—both against international terrorism and against insurgents in Iraq. As a consequence, developments in Afghanistan will stand at the top of the agenda in Bucharest.

The role of NATO in Afghanistan presents a curious paradox. Negative headlines from the region seem to accumulate continuously. Civilian reconstruction of the country has become more difficult as the security situation deteriorates. Though NATO cannot “lose” militarily in the traditional sense, the casualties suffered by the Alliance partners in their deployment areas gradually undermine public support for the Afghan mission. Yet despite the flow of bad news, only a few NATO governments seem aware of the dire nature of the situation in Afghanistan, and many NATO partners continue to make an

insufficient military contribution to the mission. National “caveats”—limits on the use of individual countries’ forces in Afghanistan—further weaken the overall military effectiveness of Alliance forces. On the political front, many Alliance partners have made only very limited efforts to convince their publics that the Afghan deployment is critical not only for Afghanistan and the region, but also for their own nation’s security and that of the West as a whole.

So far, the Afghanistan debate within NATO has focused on pressing tactical questions: Is the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) sufficient to expand the existing pockets of stability? Will the new Operational Monitoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTS), units dedicated to training Afghan forces that will remain with their trainees during combat deployments, make a difference in the overall training effort? How can the coordination between civilian and military efforts, and the coordination between various civilian actors, be improved?

These tactical questions are likely to be high on the agenda in Bucharest. However, in view of the dramatic developments in the region, leaders must also address certain basic questions, which have to this point been studiously avoided, much more directly:

- How does the Alliance consider the situation in Afghanistan? The past six years of stabilization efforts notwithstanding, there is still no commonly accepted assessment of the “state of play” there. Reports of a deteriorating security situation contradict positive evaluations of previous successes in stabilizing Afghan society. An unclear description of the situation makes decisive action much more difficult. A high-ranking expert panel, similar to the American Iraq Study Group led by former Secretary of State James Baker, could help resolve this problematic vagueness by producing a description of the current situation that is accepted by all sides as definitive. This would create a common basis for debating the Alliance’s future strategy in Afghanistan.
- What are the intended goals of the international military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan? The ambitious aim of a wide-ranging democratization of Afghanistan, which was set forth in the January 2006 “Afghanistan Compact,” has since at least partly been overtaken by events and is now widely seen as unrealistic. A more realistic consensus as to what is possible and desirable in Afghanistan does not currently exist beyond the vague formulation of “self-sustaining development.” Without clearly defined goals, measuring future progress will be impossible.
- How will the international community achieve the reconstruction of one of the poorest and most war-torn societies in the world if it is not ready to make the necessary resources available? The comparison to other crisis regions is telling. In the first two years after the end of major

combat operations the international community provided roughly \$1,400 per inhabitant for military and civilian efforts in Bosnia. In Kosovo that figure was about \$800. In the same timeframe in Afghanistan, only \$50 per inhabitant was available for these purposes.² In the long term, the idea of “nation building on the cheap” will inevitably prove illusory.

- How can leaders explain to critical publics the need to defend their own security through military deployments far from their own borders and those of the Alliance? Washington’s initial refusal to accept the support of European NATO partners in Afghanistan in 2001 makes it today even more difficult to plausibly draw the connection between stability in Afghanistan and the security of Europe. Nevertheless, the rationale for the Afghanistan deployment must be convincingly communicated if a renewal of the debate over an immediate withdrawal after every high casualty attack on NATO troops is to be forestalled.

3. The NATO Response Force

In 2002, the U.S. proposed the creation of a rapid reaction force (the NATO Response Force, or NRF) with which NATO could quickly respond to international threats. By 2006, 25,000 troops were to be designated for this force, from which units could be deployed to crisis regions around the globe within five days. A complete force including ground, aviation and naval elements would then be capable of operating autonomously in the crisis zone for up to 30 days. By meeting this standard, the NRF was to be capable of “high end operations”—combat deployments at the upper end of the intensity spectrum. The force was to be drawn from the militaries of the NATO member states. Under a complex rotation scheme, each member was required to prepare units for six months and then keep those units on call for NRF deployments for the next six. It was agreed that the NRF would be built primarily by the European NATO states in order to achieve a more equitable transatlantic burden-sharing within the Alliance. Seen in this light, the NRF was an urgent (and, in the eyes of some observers, final) appeal from the United States to the Europeans to follow through on their promises to build more capable military forces.

Two main problems hindered the NRF from the beginning. First, the Europeans only grudgingly made the necessary resources available. This was less an issue of insufficient manpower than of scarce and costly “critical enablers,” such as airlift capacity and strategic intelligence capabilities. The declaration that the NRF had reached “Full Operational Capabil-

ity” by the end of 2006 was only possible because the U.S. stepped in at the last minute to provide the missing force components.

Second, there was from the beginning no consensus as to under what circumstances the NRF should actually be deployed. Despite the fact that a number of crisis situations had arisen which might have justified the deployment of an intervention force (not least in Afghanistan), the Alliance could not agree to activate the NRF for any of them. NRF units were deployed only for disaster relief in the earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan and in post-Katrina New Orleans—surely important missions, but not ones that demanded highly trained combat troops. The means of financing of joint deployments was another complicating factor. According to the applicable regulations, the costs for deploying the NRF were to be assumed by those nations whose forces were on call under the rotation procedure at the time of the mission (“costs lie where they fall”). These countries were therefore naturally inclined to oppose an NRF deployment.

Both problems have worsened since last year. For the coming NRF rotation the Europeans have not made available sufficient forces and equipment, meaning that the NRF will not be at Full Operational Capacity. Therefore, at their October 2007 informal meeting in the Dutch city of Noordwijk, NATO defense ministers expressed a desire to build up the NRF in a “core modular system” – which de facto means to shrink the rapid reaction capabilities, without articulating a clear conception of the changed role of such a reduced force. There is also still no unity on the question of when to deploy the NRF, making it unlikely that this intervention force will be sent to a crisis region anytime in the near future.

For the European member states, this raises the question of whether, during a time in which their armed forces are being stretched by ongoing missions in Afghanistan and the Balkans, they should continue to set aside badly needed troops and equipment for a force that is unlikely to be deployed.

In view of these problems, the Bucharest Summit will have to address three questions:

- Does the shrinking of the NRF require a fundamental alteration of the conception of the rapid reaction force? Should the NRF also be intended for deployments at the lower end of the intensity spectrum?
- How should NATO deal with the problem (which does not disappear even with a smaller NRF) of holding in reserve combat-ready forces which are unlikely to be deployed, when these forces are urgently needed in other crisis regions such as Afghanistan?

² James Dobbins, et al., *America’s Role in Nation Building – From Germany to Iraq*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2003, p. 157.

- What consequences will the unwillingness of the majority of Europeans to shoulder their fair share of the military burden have for the attitude of the Alliance's leading power, the USA, toward NATO? Is this the beginning of a new debate about the basics of the transatlantic relationship?

4. The Future of NATO Enlargement

After the last major round of enlargement in March 2004, featuring the accession of seven new members, there was no hurry within the Alliance to issue further invitations. Despite the recognition of Albania, FYROM (Macedonia)³, and Croatia as "accession candidates" there existed a widespread consensus that a certain period of time should be set aside for the integration of the seven new member states before undertaking a new round of expansion.

Regardless of this sentiment, the U.S. brought the issue of enlargement back onto the agenda faster than most European member states had expected. Already in 2005, the Bush administration suggested to bring Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO, thereby provoking significant controversy within and outside of the Alliance. The three accession candidates, Albania, FYROM (Macedonia), and Croatia felt snubbed, having waited years to enter. Russia, which was already firmly opposed to any further NATO enlargement, was particularly offended by this suggestion. Many in Moscow regard Kiev not only as the historical foundation of Russia but see a close relationship to Ukraine as a precondition for Russia's claim to be a superpower.

Within NATO, many member states regarded the Ukraine as not ready for accession and pointed to the fact that the Ukrainian public was opposed to NATO entry. The prospect of Georgian membership also evoked skepticism, as many member states feared the possibility of being entangled in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Georgia. The disagreement within the Alliance on this point has eased only slightly. Though the Ukraine retains the sympathies and attentions of the U.S., it is no longer seen as a candidate for accelerated accession. In contrast, Washington continues to argue for Georgian membership and is pushing for Georgia's inclusion in the "Membership Action Plan" (MAP), a preliminary step towards NATO membership, to be approved at the Bucharest Summit.

With regard to the other three aspirants, Albania, Croatia and FYROM (Macedonia), there is a general agreement to issue a membership invitation in Bucharest. The only point of contention is, to which countries? While the U.S. argues vehemently for the acceptance of all three countries, many Europeans advocate limiting the number of new members to one, with Croatia probably having the best chances of the three. In

Bucharest, the debate will be between these two options—three new members, or one. The possibility of taking two new members is probably not on the table.

Beyond the straightforward decisions of "whom" and "when," important fundamental questions, which have previously been left off the agenda, must also be addressed. In the past, expansion decisions were primarily politically motivated: the prospect of NATO admission was, in the Alliance's view, a key element of the political and military transformation of Eastern Europe. A further incentive appeared after September 11, namely the American desire to raise the number of allies in the fight against terrorism. The actual contribution these new members could make to the Alliance's capabilities was only a secondary factor in each of these considerations.

This subordination of actual capacities to political concerns has fundamentally changed. In the recent years, NATO has developed from an "Alliance in Being" to an "Alliance in Doing". As a consequence, NATO's future depends primarily on how successfully it can execute current and future deployments. In this light, the military capabilities of all member states are a central consideration. This raises the following questions:

- How can the Alliance verify that every *enlargement* also means an *enrichment* of the Alliance's capabilities? The selection of new members must not be decided primarily on the basis of the political tractability of the aspirants. Nor is the period that a country has been waiting for accession a sufficient criterion. Instead, the contribution that a new member can make to the Alliance's collective capabilities should be the deciding factor.
- How can the Alliance ensure that new members carry out military improvements and transformation with the same vigor after their accession as they promised to beforehand? In the past two expansion rounds, the reforming zeal of some countries fell off dramatically after they had achieved their goal of full membership in NATO.

5. Global Partnership

In the lead-up to the NATO Summit in Riga, Great Britain and the United States had already begun to advocate for a reform of NATO's Partnership concept. The idea was to create a new form of partnership under the heading of a "Global Partnership," which would bring together a global group of democratically oriented "like-minded countries," which are neither eligible for nor desirous of NATO membership but could provide significant assistance to the Alliance in its international crisis interventions. Such countries—"contact countries" in NATO jargon—such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan, already contribute significant troop contingents in Afghanistan or offer substantive assis-

³ The wording is not a political statement, but reflects the language used in NATO.

tance to the Alliance's maritime counterterrorism mission. If these countries risk the lives of their soldiers for NATO missions, then—according to the logic of Global Partnership advocates—they are entitled to a certain degree of influence in NATO's decision-making processes when these missions are being discussed. Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed a new formal status for these countries, that of "Participants," which would place them above the existing "Partners" but under the full members. Such Participants would be closely consulted, but would have no voting rights in the North Atlantic Council. A new, separate forum would be created for the necessary consultations.

This proposal did not succeed in Riga, as a number of important NATO partners (including Germany and France) regarded it critically. They feared that not a least the word "global" would arouse the false perception of a NATO on a course of worldwide expansion. Another concern was that countries in Asia or the Middle East might misperceive the Global Partnership as a Western front against the Islamic world. At the same time, the fear arose among NATO's previous partnership countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe that the new forum for the Global Partners would create a "partnership of the rich" that could detract from the significance of the existing partnerships and cooperation with their regions.

In spite of this criticism, Washington and London have continued to promote the concept of the Global Partnership. Two primary arguments speak in favor of such an institutionalization of NATO's relations with western-oriented, militarily capable countries outside the Alliance. First, supporters of the idea point to the fact that the idea responds to the expressed desires of several such countries. Countries like Australia, New Zealand and Finland had sought, of their own initiative, more influence in Alliance decision-making when they contributed their own troops to NATO combat deployments. Second, the support of these countries has become indispensable. An organization that has evolved from a Eurocentric defense alliance to a global security provider must be successful in its crisis interventions, the argument runs. If this is true, the importance of close connections to countries whose military capabilities allows them to provide needed support is obvious. However, at least two central questions remain unresolved:

- According to what criteria would the members of the Global Partnership be selected? Will military capability, the degree of political closeness to the "West," or the strategic relevance of the particular country (and, strategic relevance to whom?) be decisive? What would happen in the case of a potential partner who is militarily capable but demonstrates no particular closeness to the Alliance? There have been indications that Beijing is considering involving itself in Afghanistan through a Provincial Reconstruction Team. Does that make China a potential "Global Partner," which deserves a say in NATO decision-making?
- How will Russia and Ukraine fit into the Global Partnership concept, given that both countries have special relationships with NATO (each through a unique institutional mechanism) that differ from partnerships with other countries?

6. The NATO-EU Relationship

One of the enduring themes—and simultaneously one of those most rife with contradictions—in the European-American security debate is the relationship of NATO to the European Union. In no policy area can one find as much transatlantic unity as exists with regard to the necessity of intimate cooperation between NATO and the EU. A network of institutions and mechanisms has been created to make possible coordinated military action, and the memberships of both organizations overlap to a great degree: 21 of 26 NATO member states also belong to the EU. Yet at the same time, no other area of transatlantic security policy is characterized by such compulsive restrictiveness and demonstrative uncommunicativeness as the EU-NATO relationship. Insiders tellingly refer to the relations between the two organizations in Brussels as the "frozen conflict."

The long-smoldering dispute between Greece and non-EU member Turkey over the role of Cyprus is the most often cited obstacle to cooperation. In truth, ideological positions on both sides of the Atlantic have prevented the construction of a NATO-EU relationship based on synergies instead of restrictions. Washington has regularly called for cooperation, but implicitly assumes the dominance of NATO and could scarcely imagine accepting any limitations on its own decision-making and freedom of action. From that point of view, the U.S. perceived every step toward increased European autonomy in the realm of security policy as an attack on the existing transatlantic rapport. France, for its part, sees in the EU a political project, which as a "purer organization" should take precedence over NATO. Paris sees this political project as permanently threatened by a perceived American dominance within NATO; in the French view, allowing NATO and the EU to grow closer would expose the latter to Washington's oversized influence. A high ranking French diplomat posted to NATO described France's nightmare scenario thusly: "Washington would steer the EU from the backseat."

Although for a long time these fundamentally different perspectives seemed to make a convergence impossible, subtle indicators of a change have begun to emerge. The reasons stem from current political developments. On the U.S. side, the Bush Administration has learned through the painful experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan that European allies are useful even for a supposedly omnipotent superpower. Top administration officials, who previously characterized the defense policy efforts of the EU as the "greatest danger for NATO," today declare that such "theological" positions no longer apply. On the European side, the new French government has sent positive signals in the direction of NATO and seems, in its early stages, to be breaking with earlier dogmas of French security policy.

The EU's ambitious plans with regard to an independent military capability have also fallen far behind expectations. The desired (or feared) European autonomy in security policy will be a long time coming.

Finally, current developments are compelling a shift away from familiar patterns of thinking. If efficient cooperation between the EU and NATO fails in Afghanistan, both French and American soldiers, as well as those of other nations, will pay with their lives for the insufficient determination to achieve unity. In view of these changes, the following questions present themselves:

- To what degree is a division of labor conceivable under which a militarily potent NATO focuses on the military side of crisis management and reconstruction, while the EU, with its resources and experience in the non-military area, concentrates on civilian reconstruction? How can such a “job sharing” be harmonized with the EU’s claim for autonomous military action?
- Are the cooperation agreements previously negotiated between NATO and the EU still adequate given changed circumstances? The laboriously negotiated “Berlin Plus” agreement provides detailed procedures for a scenario in which the EU takes autonomous military action but desires to make use of NATO’s supporting capacities (i.e. planning or infrastructure). Is such an autonomous action still the most likely for future crises, or does stronger common action by the two organizations (along the lines outlined above) require that additional arrangements be worked out?

7. A New Strategic Concept

The necessity of a fundamental strategic debate has stood on the NATO agenda at least since the German Chancellor Angela Merkel officially pronounced the need for a new NATO Strategic Concept in early 2006. It is obvious that the current strategy, which dates to 1999, does not sufficiently reflect the foundational changes of the past years: NATO’s victory in Kosovo, the September 11 attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the accession of seven new member states. It is also indisputable that over the past eight years, NATO has in large measure lost its role as the central forum for the transatlantic security debate, and that the Alliance urgently needs a consensus about its future role. Tellingly, no nation’s ambassador to NATO has spoken out against the formulation of a new Strategic Concept in the internal discussions on the subject with NATO’s Secretary General.

In dispute are when the official mandate for the new strategy should be issued, and when the result should be delivered. Ideally, the work would be officially commissioned in Bucharest and the completed strategy delivered at the jubilee summit planned for early 2009 in Berlin. However, at that point the newly elected American administration will not yet be fully prepared to act. Postponing the jubilee summit out of consideration for the new American administration would create an overlap with the German federal election campaign. If the commissioning of the new Strategic Concept is put off un-

til 2009, NATO will not possess a strategy document appropriate to current global conditions until 2010 or 2011.

Despite the fundamental consensus as to the necessity of a new strategic concept, no substantive deliberations are taking place within the Alliance. As one top NATO representative recently noted: “The new Strategic Concept is being discussed everywhere—except in NATO itself.” This raises several questions (in addition to the timing problem) that must be addressed in Bucharest:

- Should the existing concept simply be modified, or should the Alliance, in view of the radical changes of the past years, attempt to craft a completely new, incisive strategy? Past experiences with NATO strategy debates seem to recommend a modification of the existing document.
- How can the new NATO strategy be harmonized with the EU’s security strategy - which is also to be overhauled - and the regularly produced National Security Strategy of the United States?
- What self-conception should the North Atlantic Alliance enshrine in its strategic concept? Is NATO a global crisis management institution which, like a subcontractor, takes over international stabilization missions at the request of the United Nations, regardless of the degree to which member states are themselves affected? Or is NATO an Alliance which only acts when—whether for self-defense or international crisis management—the security interests of its members are at stake? Even if the latter is the case, the question remains: who defines these security interests for the Alliance?

8. The Reintegration of France into NATO

The question of a full return of France to NATO has arisen with the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and has since assumed a significant place among NATO debates.

Though a founding member of NATO, France withdrew from the Alliance’s military structures in 1966. In 1996, Paris returned to the NATO Military Committee but remained out of the Nuclear Planning Group and Defence Planning Committee. In the same year, French President Jacques Chirac had already attempted to lead France back to full participation in the Alliance’s committees. This proposal failed as a consequence of the French insistence on the right to appoint the NATO commander for Southern Europe, a post traditionally occupied by an American admiral. As this officer simultaneously commands the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, Washington was not prepared to relinquish this post to Paris. To this day it is debated whether the French government was seriously interested in

a return to the Alliance, or whether France intentionally set conditions that precluded any chance for a successful outcome.

In August 2007, Nicholas Sarkozy suggested a renewed movement towards NATO, which he clarified in September. As Chirac did in 1996, Sarkozy demanded prestigious senior command positions should France return to full participation in the Alliance. Nevertheless, the prospects for success seem significantly better than in 1996, as the new French President has espoused a decidedly pro-Atlantic policy and has broken with the rather compulsive policy of his predecessor with respect to NATO. The outgoing Bush Administration is also behaving less ideologically toward certain European allies than in past years. The real issue this time seems not to be the number of high level command posts, Paris will be claiming but whether Washington and London will be prepared to accept a more positive view on the common European security and defense policy (ESDP).

At a first glance, the gains for the Alliance from a French rapprochement seem rather modest. Militarily, France counts among the most active member states and makes already a significant contribution to the capability of the Alliance. Psychologically and politically, however, a reintegration could be a meaningful symbol of transatlantic unity, particularly since the French insistence on a special status in the Alliance was historically a frequent source of internal friction.

How to respond to the French overture is currently a subject of debate within NATO:

- Should NATO accelerate the process to capitalize on the auspicious moment and embolden France to make a rapid return? The momentum of the new government, which apparently is comfortable taking unconventional stands, must not be talked to death in the Alliance – according to supporters. If significant concessions are required, these might be justified by the gains.

- Or should the Alliance, keeping in mind the experiences of 1996, react cautiously to the French deliberations? Last time, warn the skeptics, overheated debates sparked by excessive haste confounded efforts to achieve a French return—heated disputes were underway before the seriousness of the French offer was even verified. Today, it remains to be seen how many of his revolutionary ideas the new President can successfully implement and how many will fall victim to the vicissitudes of politics.

9. Conclusions

The upcoming NATO Summit in Bucharest will be one of great significance for NATO. After the “summit of postponements” in Riga, many key decisions can no longer be put off. Furthermore, current developments, such as the critical situation in Afghanistan, make it essential that NATO confront fundamental issues that go beyond operational and tactical considerations.

Whether the governments of the NATO member states are prepared to address such fundamental issues remains an open question. On the one hand, the climate inside the Alliance - at least in comparison to previous years - is relatively undisturbed. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel has pursued a decidedly more transatlantic foreign policy than her predecessor, and developments in France suggest a fundamentally altered political outlook, to the benefit of NATO. Simultaneously, the outgoing U.S. administration is now charting a more Alliance-friendly course promised by the American president at the beginning of his second term.

On the other hand, the Bucharest Summit will take place in the middle of the American presidential campaign—a phase during which the NATO’s leading power will hardly be in a position to engage in fundamental discussions about the Alliance’s future. This raises the question whether Bucharest can produce the strategic direction that is required to address today’s pressing security challenges.

2004-2007 NDC RESEARCH PAPERS

Table of contents by topic

Balkans

- *L'OTAN et les Balkans: pistes pour une question qui se rappelle à nous*, Eric Chevallier (RP 13, October 2004)
- *Quelle approche pour l'OTAN dans les Balkans à la lumière des évolutions de la sécurité dans la région?*, Gheorghe Ciascai (RP 14, December 2004)
- *Kosovo – Strategic Options for the Future?*, Cees Coops and Peter Faber (RP 19, May 2005)

Central Asia & Caucasus

- *The New Strategic and Security Landscape of Southeast Europe: The Case for a Wider Black Sea Area*, Vasile Sec?refl (RP 15, February 2005)
- *The Role of the Wider Black Sea Area (WBSA) in a Future European Security Space*, Cees Coops (RP 24, November 2005)
- *Armenian Perceptions of International Security in the South Caucasus*, David S. Yost (RP 32, March 2007)
- *Azerbaijan's Key Role in the South Caucasus*, Andrew Monaghan (RP 32, March 2007)
- *Georgia and International Politics in the South Caucasus*, Cees M. Coops (RP 32, March 2007)

East & Russia

- *Influencing Russian Public Opinion in order to Improve Russian Military Reform*, Igor Sharavov (RP 1, March 2004)
- *La réglementation juridique de la solde du personnel militaire sous contrat en Russie: particularités, problèmes et perspectives*, Vladimir Levanov (RP 1, March 2004)
- *Criminal Influence/Control over the Russian Military-Industrial Complex in the Context of Global Security*, Leonid Y. Kosals (RP 1, March 2004)
- *The Russian Orthodox Church: An Interlocutor in the NATO-Russia Relationship?*, Lionel Ponsard (RP 2, April 2004)
- *La Géorgie à la croisée des intérêts russes et américains*, Lionel Ponsard (RP 3, April 2004)
- *A Road Map for Ukraine*, Lionel Ponsard (RP 17, April 2005)
- *From a Weak State to a Reunified Moldova: New Opportunities to Resolve the Transdnistria Conflict*, Jos Boonstra (RP 23, October 2005)
- *Prospects for NATO-Russia Joint Peace Support Operations*, Lionel Ponsard (RP 25, December 2005)

Mediterranean & Middle East

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- *NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: Options for the Future (Senior Course 103)*, Peter Faber (RP 6, May 2004)
- *Géométries variables du "Moyen-Orient élargi"*, Laure Borgomano-Loup (RP 7, May 2004)
- *Droit coranique, sociétés arabes et Dialogue méditerranéen*, Hamid Tadlaoui (RP 7, May 2004)
- *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Lessons Learned, Ways Ahead, and Open Questions*, Peter Faber and Carlo Masala (RP 9, June 2004)
- *Distillation and Elaboration of Selected Senior Course 104 Study Project Analyses by Peter Faber: Looking South: A Three-Tiered Approach to NATO Involvement in the Maghreb and Sub-Sahara Africa* (RP 12, October 2004)

- *NATO in Afghanistan: The Challenges of Political Reconstruction*, Samina Ahmed (RP 13, October 2004)
- *Turkey's Role in NATO in the Post-Cold War Security Environment*, fiule Niflanci (RP 16, March 2005)
- *NATO and the Middle East Peace Process: Scenarios of Possibilities and Risks*, Heba Negm (RP 20, June 2005)
- *NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative: Prospects for Development*, Laure Borgomano-Loup (RP 21, June 2005)
- *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative: The Next Steps*, Carlo Masala and Peter Faber (RP 21, June 2005)
- *Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan - A Continued March towards Implementation*, Mark Sedra (RP 22, July-August 2005)
- *Peace in the Middle East after Israeli Disengagement*, Laure Borgomano-Loup (RP 24, November 2005)
- *Lessons learned from the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan: Implications for Russian Defense Reform*, Oleg Kulakov (RP 26, March 2006)
- *Nouvelles responsabilités de l'Union africaine, nouvelles dispositions de l'Alliance atlantique*, Jean Dufourcq (RP 27, April 2006)
- *Formes durables d'une future coopération entre l'Alliance atlantique et l'Union africaine*, Alfredo Mantica (RP 27, April 2006)
- *L'OTAN, l'Union européenne et leurs offres de coopération en Méditerranée*, Hélène Prestat (RP 28, September 2006)
- *A qui profite le gel du conflit du Sahara occidental?* Laurence Ammour (RP 30, November 2006)

Political Affairs

- *German Foreign Policy in Crisis?* Carlo Masala (RP 4, May 2004)
- *NATO and Interventionism: Some Possible Criteria for the Future, NDC-RB Elaboration on Senior Course 103 Analyses*, Peter Faber (RP 5, May 2004)
- *Prévention et gestion des crises: la perspective européenne*, Jean Dufourcq (RP 8, June 2004)
- *ESDP and NATO in the Wake of the Istanbul Summit*, Carlo Masala (RP 8, June 2004)
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