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What Future for NATO?

Conference held at Helenów/Warsaw, Poland

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1. SPEECH OF MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE OF POLAND, RADOSLAW SIKORSKI,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It seems to me that today the Alliance is in remarkably good shape. It continues to be the most powerful, permanent coalition that links together Europe and North America. It has transformed its structures and policies to meet a new security environment while preserving unique features from the past, such as military integration and the commitment to collective defence; and it responded quite effectively to the most acute challenges of the new situation in Europe: the missions in Western Balkans, the enlargement, and Partnership cooperation are all on track. Recently NATO has gone even further, beyond its Euro-Atlantic area, engaging in Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa.

But there are challenges and there are reasons why I have asked the European Centre Natolin to gather us here, because I would like to hear your advice about Poland's position before the Riga Summit. My need for advice comes under the three headings: first, the political role of NATO, secondly, its military capabilities, and thirdly the content of the Riga Summit itself.

As to the political role of NATO, as we know there is no unified position within the Alliance – most experts and politicians argue that NATO should take a broad approach. Some say that it should concentrate on purely military issues, and leaving more political ones to other organizations such as the EU. As a result there is no real debate within NATO on today's truly strategic issues, such as Iran or the Middle East crisis. The place of NATO in transatlantic relations is not certain. To what extent does the US want to use NATO as a platform for security consultations with Europe? Do some Europeans prefer to deal with Americans via the EU-US strategic partnership? Is there any chance for more serious NATO-EU cooperation?

Most scholars argue that NATO needs a New Strategic Concept, but there has been no real, even informal, discussion on this within the Alliance. Some member states, including ourselves, perceive possible debate on a new strategy as an opening of Pandora's Box. They think it would bring new divisions and tensions instead of clarity over NATO's long term objectives.

The issue of further enlargement is not settled. Decision on admission of the three MAP Balkan countries is expected around 2008. Nevertheless, Ukraine is a big question mark. NATO almost granted Ukraine MAP that would have created a realistic membership perspective. But as we all know, the recent statement by Prime Minister Janukowycz has put a stop to that. And, finally, Russia. The NATO-Russia Council is working but Moscow is still more interested in getting through its own influence over NATO decisions rather than promoting it as a practical, concrete place for making cooperation work.

Secondly, the military transformation of the Alliance. That process as we all know was announced at the Prague Summit in 2002 but it is far indeed from being accomplished.

There is still a gap between NATO's political ambitions to be engaged militarily in various parts of the world and its ability to provide the necessary forces. The current situation over the force generation for ISAF is a clear example.

The transformation lacks sufficient political support and public understanding. Force generation for NRF is another example. And the delays with the decisions on AGS is yet another. Transformation is perceived as a US-driven process and clearly would require a greater sense of European ownership to proceed more smoothly. Some Allies, ourselves included, are concerned that the development of expeditionary capabilities would be done at the expense of collective defence. In order to be fully engaged in transformation, countries such as ourselves need unequivocal assurance that Art. 5 will remain the cornerstone of NATO. In other words: as we develop into the new NATO we want to be sure that the old NATO is still in place.

NATO transformation, some argue, should be better synchronized with similar developments within the EU. Currently both organizations exchange documents but barely talk to each other.

Then there is the issue of global NATO. Can NATO become a truly global organization? Is there a political will? Is there a public support for this? The answer, seems to me, is that NATO could, and is indeed, engaging in operations world-wide but it should be done very selectively, only in those cases when we can bring value added. The mission in Afghanistan is one such operation and of course it is crucial to the credibility of the Alliance. Failure in Afghanistan would not only damage NATO as such, but it would strike a blow to multilateralism. It would show that the only choice left in a situation of a real crisis outside the Euro-Atlantic area would be between unilateral action by nation states, or no action at all.

In the near future, the main challenge seems to be the development of some new NATO partnerships, both with countries that need our help, such as friends and allies in the Middle East, and those that could help us, such as Australia and New Zealand. But there is one important precondition for the development of the new, selective global Alliance. And that is to finish the business in Europe first, such as the existence of the last

dictatorship in Europe, and such as the existence of frozen conflicts on the periphery of Europe.

The Riga Summit would obviously not solve all these problems. It is a working Summit that will probably not bring any fundamental change to NATO, although it could help to put the Alliance on a right course by advancing its post-Cold War “success story” and by fixing at least some of the deficiencies. The Summit could be instrumental in linking political and military aspects of the Alliance’s evolution. Just casting it out, four possible deliverables could be brought forward: the Summit could revitalize political consultations and the strategic debate within NATO; it should bring a coherent transformation package and indicate a clear way forward for AGS, and for the Special Operation Forces as well as or strategic lift capabilities; it could reinforce NATO’s commitment to ongoing operations; and it could create, or rather announce the creation, of new Alliance Partnerships.

But the very purpose of our meeting here, I hope, is for you to tell us what our position on Riga should be and what the Summit can achieve. Thank you very much for coming to Poland, to the modest Ministry’s of Defense property. Welcome. I declare the conference open. Thank you.

2. CONFERENCE REPORT

Organized by Natolin European Centre in co-operation with the Polish Ministry of Defence and hosted by Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, this conference was attended by NATO and member state officials, as well as by representatives of European and American think tanks (including the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute). The overall purpose of the conference was to discuss the evolution of NATO in the light of the organisation’s current commitments (especially in Afghanistan) and the forthcoming summit in Riga.

NATO’s operation in Afghanistan provided the overarching background of the event. The conference took place just a few days after the NATO Supreme Commander, General James Jones, appealed for more troops to help combat the Taliban’s southern

offensive and to ease NATO's growing difficulties in Afghanistan. In response to the appeal, Poland offered a deployment of 1,000 troops, which, to date, has been the most substantial commitment of new troops offered by NATO's member states.

Key Questions

The following three questions dominated the debate: (i) the political role of NATO; (ii) Afghanistan and (iii) the likely content of the Riga Summit.

The Political Role of NATO

There is no agreement over this issue within the Alliance. A few years ago, the then German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, called for a new 'political NATO'. But this call was not universally welcomed: the view that NATO should concentrate on purely military tasks is strong within some member states. Some proponents of a 'political NATO' suggest that the Alliance should be involved in transatlantic diplomacy on Iran and the Middle East (see, for example, the article by Ronald D. Asmus and Richard Holbrooke, February 2006). However, the place of NATO in transatlantic relations is not fully clear – the US has not decided to what extent it wishes to use NATO as a primary platform of its security relations with the Europeans, while at the same time some Europeans favour direct co-operation in the EU-US framework. The other political questions concerned the need for a New Strategic Concept, future enlargement and the notion of a global NATO.

New Strategic Concept

The notion of a New Strategic Concept (NSC) raised some disquiet among Polish participants, whose overwhelming preference was for the maintenance of the traditional role of the Alliance – 'collective defence' as defined by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. In contrast, some other participants argued that it is a mistake to see a NSC as potentially undermining NATO's defensive role. Whilst current discussions indicate that a NSC would be likely to emphasise expeditionary tasks and broaden the geographical scope of NATO operations (an option advocated by the US) such an evolution is, it was argued, necessary if the Alliance is to remain relevant to today's volatile environment.

A third view was that rather than developing a new doctrine, NATO should focus on fulfilling its current obligations (the operation in Afghanistan and NATO's military transformation). It was pointed out in this context that it is up to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to commit the Alliance to certain types of operations and such a decision would not be influenced by a NSC.

Enlargement

It is possible that at the Riga Summit the three Balkan members of the MAP (Membership Action Plan) – Croatia, FYROM and Albania – may be invited to join NATO or at least receive a clear endorsement of their aspirations. Until recently it was possible that Ukraine would be invited to join MAP, which would create realistic chances of NATO membership for Kiev in the foreseeable future. However, following Prime Minister Yanukovich's September trip to Brussels, where he announced that Ukraine would not seek MAP membership, the future of Kiev's relations with the Alliance became unclear.

The tone of the enlargement debate was mostly sceptical. It was argued, for example, that NATO faces the danger of becoming an organisation whose primary role is to 'enlarge'. Past enlargements were cited as a point of reference here. It was argued in this context that whilst the 2004 enlargement was politically valuable, its value in terms of the military contribution it entailed was at best questionable ('just a few hundred deployable forces but 5 new votes on the NAC'). It is therefore necessary, it was argued, to judge future candidates on the basis of their military preparedness, which apparently the Alliance failed to do in the past.

It was also mentioned in this context that whilst enlargement is no longer a controversial issue in the US (for example the 2004 enlargement was adopted in the Senate with almost no opposition and minimal debate), this is not necessarily a sign of great enthusiasm for the notion but rather an indication of declining interest in the Alliance in the US.

Global NATO

Can NATO go global? Can it establish close partnerships with other democracies around the globe, such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan or even with friendly states in the Middle East? Such an evolution of the Alliance is endorsed by the current US administration but it is at best controversial for most Europeans. Some European participants questioned the viability of the argument that NATO could provide security to remote parts of the world – such as East Asia or even the Middle East. Should NATO attempt to do that, they argued, it would affect its ability to fulfil its defence commitments towards the current members. Moreover, a global NATO could run the risk of a political backlash, as it could be seen as an alliance of the west/democracies against others.

However, it was also argued that a globalisation of the Alliance's outreach is feasible as long as it is done selectively, as demonstrated by NATO's current engagement in Afghanistan. Perhaps in the future NATO could consider establishing closer partnerships with other global democracies; however, first and foremost it should finish its business in Europe. The existence of frozen conflicts and authoritarian politics at the periphery of Europe were mentioned in this context.

Afghanistan

The group agreed that the operation in Afghanistan represented a very serious challenge to the credibility of the Alliance. However, just how serious this challenge was became a matter of debate. Some participants objected to the view that failure in Afghanistan would spell the end of NATO as a credible alliance. This, it was argued, is a dangerous proposition that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Besides, it is difficult to ascertain what constitutes success or failure in such an unstable theatre as Afghanistan.

However, most participants endorsed the view that the operation in Afghanistan is of existential importance for NATO and, more broadly, for transatlantic relations. The credibility of the Alliance as a military force is clearly on the line here but there is also an important political dimension to consider. It was argued in this context that NATO's engagement in Afghanistan was a consensus-driven decision. If the allies cannot succeed

when they agree, then how can they succeed at all? It was also argued that a failure in Afghanistan 'would strike a blow at multilateralism. It would show that the only choice left in a situation of real crisis outside the Euro-Atlantic area would be between unilateral action by nation states, or no action at all'.

As for the issue of 'what constitutes a success in Afghanistan?' this was defined in terms of suppressing the level of violence to the point that would enable the Afghan government to carry out the extensive reconstruction work that needs to be done in the country and execute its decisions.

The Riga Summit

The participants expressed modest expectations about the content of the Riga Summit. However, some argued that the summit may mark the beginning of a process leading to a more thorough transformation of the Alliance, which would be continued at the two subsequent summits (2008 and 2009). It was argued in this context that the Riga Summit could be viewed as a success if it initiates the following processes:

- Revitalise political consultations and strategic debate within NATO.
- Produce a sound transformation package and indicate a way forward for AGC (Alliance Ground Surveillance), Special Operation Forces and strategic lift capabilities.
- Reinforce commitment to ongoing operations (especially in Afghanistan).

Conference report by Marcin Zaborowski