Some Comments from the High North on the Prague Summit

Chris Prebensen

NATO has been and will continue to be under dramatic change as it adapts to its enlarged membership and its new tasks and challenges. The NATO-Russia Council process holds much promise if filled with the right issues and with people of good will. The remaining members of the reinforced partnership should have every reason to feel part of the security policy process in Europe as they qualify for membership, but all have a major role to play in meeting the new tasks, be it against international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), supporting the establishment of the NATO Response Force or a streamlined command structure.

There has been much focus on the Alliance’s military capabilities in the run-up to Prague. This is important for the Alliance’s credibility, but its credibility is also dependent on its good political work. Of major importance after the Prague Summit’s decisions, in my view, is the preservation of NATO’s consultation, consensus-building and decision-making machinery.

NATO’s unique ability has been and continues to be its consultation and consensus-building process and its ability to implement rapidly what has been agreed. Many of these elements were put in place already at the start to meet the instabilities and insecurities that Europe and many of the member countries faced at that time. This was further strengthened through the report of the "three wise men" in 1956, the Harmel process of 1967 and further adaptations through the years. Central to this process has been well-oiled crisis management machinery for the exchange of intelligence, information and the implementation of actions agreed.

If the “transformed” NATO of 19 +7 is to respond to the critical challenges to which the new environment will expose us, it is in my opinion of paramount importance that NATO’s structure and staff have the financial and human resources at hand to run the consultation process and continuously build the necessary consensus. When new members joined in the 1950s or even 1980s, they said afterwards that it took them ten years or more to adapt to the NATO process. NATO now faces the challenge of showing the ropes to 3+7 new members in a much more time-critical period, while running a parallel process in the NATO-Russia context. This needs an investment by nations in adequate and trained resources.

We have seen that nations have increased the various tasks of NATO’s International Staff several times in the last five years into a major overload. At the Prague Summit it was agreed to reorganize the International Staff and reduce committees by 30 percent. It is not the number of committees that makes the difference. They actually help the new nations in consultation, consensus-building and cooperation. The problem is the number of additional tasks that nations come up with without the additional resources, or indication of what they are willing to drop. This was again done at Prague. As always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We can only wait and see.

As an NGO, the Norwegian Atlantic Committee was very active in the debates leading up to the Prague Summit. Action against Iraq has been a central issue, so the Prague statement on Iraq was therefore warmly welcomed with its commitment to support the UN’s efforts to ensure full and immediate compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

There has also been much discussion on the implications of the Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC) and the NATO Response Force. There is some worry that this could bring the new Norwegian defense effort out of balance. The main focus of Norwegian contributions to PCC are measures to improve the flexibility of Norwegian military forces, their mobility, sustainability, interoperability and ability to cooperate with forces from other
countries. We will improve the nuclear, biological or chemical (NBC) protection of our Immediate Reaction Force (IRF) units; improve the availability of precision-guided munitions; contribute to the development of an Allied airborne ground surveillance force; contribute to an intermediate multinational heavy lift force; contribute to a multinational solution for a tanker fleet; considerably improve access to strategic sealift; improve the support function for deployable army units including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs); and build a support ship for the new frigates. This will require restructuring the investment and procurement budgets for the next five years, bringing forward some of the investment plans from the next period, and implying hiring or leasing appropriate aircraft together with other nations. Norway hopes to be a lead nation in developing strategic sealift.

There has always been asymmetry in military terms in the transatlantic relationship. With the European focus on soft security there has been a division of labor. This is where we see some of the challenges in public diplomacy in the time ahead. To ensure public support, a common commitment to democratic values, human rights and the rule of law must be seen. For many Europeans international law plays an important role.

On the other hand there is also a public diplomacy challenge to explain how times have changed, particularly for the United States after 9/11. They are Atlantic family and there needs to be a continuous dialogue. The EU’s enlargement provides an added challenge for the EU countries toward Washington. These are all issues with which the NGO community needs to come to grips in the post-Prague period.

Another issue of major interest to Norwegian public opinion that will come out of the Prague Summit through the NATO-Russia Council process is the increased focus on WMD and the nuclear environmental issues in northwest Russia. The lack of security at storage facilities is an added element in the bilateral and multilateral efforts that have been under way for some years concerning nuclear threat reduction, nuclear safety and the decommissioning of nuclear-propelled submarines on the Kola Peninsula. Norway has had a bilateral agreement with Russia since 1995 and a trilateral defense environmental agreement (AMEC) between the US, Russia and Norway since 1996. The bilateral agreement is followed up through annual programs. An extensive exchange program is also developing, including a retraining program for naval officers from the Russian Northern Fleet into civilian trades.

In the follow-up from the Prague Summit there are, as mentioned, many challenges for NGOs. Some NGOs from the new member states have up to ten years experience of running an efficient organization. They can give useful tips to many of the veterans on how to catch the interest and participation of a wide following. With other issues coming up, the real challenge will be to maintain and renew this interest, not only during the next two years, but also in the longer term. Here we need to engage the whole Atlantic Treaty Association structure to see how we remain relevant for future generations.

*Chris Prebensen is Secretary-General of the Norwegian Atlantic Committee.*