

Transforming NATO (...again)

A Primer for NATO's 2006 Summit in Riga

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NATO's 26 members will meet in Riga, Latvia, this November for what some are calling the 'introverted' summit. NATO summits are often used to launch major initiatives or to welcome new members into the fold. The Riga summit, however, will break from that tradition and allow NATO Allies to take stock of the Alliance's ongoing political and military transformation while focusing on the current mission in Afghanistan. A handful of small but important capability initiatives will be launched, including the acquisition of common assets and a new programme for special operation forces. Deep political divisions, however, will prevent the Alliance from making comparable progress on its overarching strategic direction. If NATO wants to advance its transformation agenda, however, it will need to resolve fundamental questions about its future roles and missions. Major developments concerning enlargement, partnerships, training, capabilities and coordination with other organizations will only be possible when NATO Allies reach consensus on the Alliance's purpose in today's complex security environment.

Political Transformation

The term transformation is often associated with efforts to prepare forces for new missions – in NATO's case, expeditionary operations. While NATO will use its Riga summit to launch and strengthen a number of capability initiatives aimed at preparing its forces for future missions, it will also focus on the Alliance's ongoing *political* transformation. Initially, the Riga summit was slated to unveil a list of ambitious political reforms tied to NATO headquarters. It now appears that Riga will focus on three core areas: endorsing the Comprehensive Political Guidance; committing NATO to future rounds of enlargement; and committing the Alliance to building and strengthening global partnerships (along with a possible tasking to look into the feasibility of creating a new training initiative). While the value of these initiatives should not be underestimated, NATO will need to return to its original, more ambitious, list of reforms in preparation for its next summit if it wants to preserve its viability as an effective and relevant alliance.

Comprehensive Political Guidance

At the centre of Riga's political agenda sits the Comprehensive Political Guidance (CPG), which will be endorsed by heads of state and government in November 2006. This document aims to outline a framework and political direction for NATO's continuing transformation, but it fails to provide NATO members with the guidance that they need to meet future challenges. As a result, NATO should aim to rewrite its Strategic Concept for its sixtieth anniversary summit in 2009.

NATO Enlargement and Partnerships

Since 1999, NATO summits have always included announcements or initiatives tied to enlargement. In that regard, the Riga summit is likely to be different. Political and popular scepticism about the value of further enlargement, the slow pace of reforms, and deteriorating security situations have damaged various aspirants' cases, as has a general 'absorption fatigue' among current NATO members. NATO will be careful not to close any doors, but the possibility of issuing invitations even to the Adriatic Charter nations (certainly the most favoured for membership at the moment) seems to have dissipated. Before its next

summit in 2008, NATO should foster real debate about universal membership standards and goals while maintaining its open-door policy.

Regarding partnerships, all NATO members recognize the enormous contributions that non-NATO allies have made to Alliance operations in recent years. The presence of Australian, New Zealand and Japanese soldiers in Afghanistan is one positive example of such cooperation. What NATO cannot seem to agree upon is the best way to reward and further strengthen the Allies' relationship with these and other like-minded countries. In Riga, NATO communiqués will likely stress the importance of expanding cooperation with partner countries without committing NATO or the partner countries to any concrete initiatives. In the next two years, NATO should undertake a full audit of existing partnership programmes, ensure that all players understand the fundamental objectives, and seek to improve coordination among various partnership programmes. NATO should not risk diluting the much-desired label of 'NATO partner' with partnerships that are heavy on rhetoric and short on substance.

Military Transformation

Despite NATO's ongoing struggle to reach consensus on its role in today's global security environment, the Alliance has succeeded in launching a number of new capability initiatives over the last ten to fifteen years. The Riga summit will continue that tradition by formally declaring the NATO Response Force (NRF) operational, announcing two much-needed common asset programmes, launching a new programme for special operations forces, and tasking the Alliance to investigate ballistic missile defence (BMD) cooperation further among NATO members. It is possible that the summit will also suggest that NATO considers developing special capabilities for stabilization and reconstruction operations.

Like any effort tied to military capabilities, however, the challenge will come in turning many of these paper promises into concrete action. In the past, NATO members have made a number of rhetorical commitments that they have then failed to meet. Therefore, in the years ahead, NATO will need to identify innovative ways for members to bridge the gap between ambition and capabilities. Some of the best ways to do so include addressing funding approaches (for example, 'costs lie where they fall') that disincentivize participation, resolving NATO's broader strategic debate about why such capabilities are required and helping members to identify ways to spend what limited resources they have more wisely.

Current Operations

Beyond transformation, the Riga summit will focus heavily on NATO's current operations. First and foremost, NATO's ongoing mission in Afghanistan will serve as an indicator of the Alliance's viability and effectiveness in tackling twenty-first century challenges. NATO members will need to determine whether or not they have the political will to commit the capabilities that the mission requires. Kosovo and Darfur may also appear in the final summit documents, although it is doubtful that any new developments regarding these two missions will be unveiled.

Afghanistan

The future of NATO ultimately hangs on a successful mission in Afghanistan. Consequently, the most essential question to address at the Riga summit is whether or not NATO can muster the will and capabilities to stay the course. A positive outcome for the Alliance would be revitalized unity and tangible improvement in resources, interoperability, and civil-military cooperation on the ground in Afghanistan.

The Alliance should use the Riga summit to reaffirm its commitment to the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and show the Afghans that it will commit the necessary capabilities and resources to succeed. After the summit, NATO Allies will need to define ISAF's role in security sector reform and to agree on how to balance reconstruction and security objectives. NATO also needs to resolve the poppy eradication debate. While Afghanistan's future is tied to its ability to eliminate drug production, NATO's role in these efforts should be limited. NATO Allies should, however, investigate ways that other instruments and organizations can help Afghanistan with this complex and long-term challenge.

Kosovo

When NATO leaders gather in Riga, they will inevitably discuss the future of NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR). Kosovo is at a critical juncture. A general consensus has emerged that the status quo is untenable because the political ambiguity is fostering crime, corruption, radicalism, emigration and a weakening of Kosovo's institutions. Consequently, NATO should use the Riga summit to reaffirm its commitment to Kosovo while recognizing that the nature of the conflict has changed. Security threats increasingly have intra-state rather than inter-state origins. Future peacekeeping and peace-building functions will therefore have to focus on issues of sustainable development, governance and rebuilding institutions. While it is unlikely that the Riga summit will produce meaningful new initiatives on Kosovo, it should nonetheless be a first step in mapping out NATO's future posture in the event of an independent Kosovo.

The Next NATO Summit

Just as compelling as what is on the agenda at NATO's Riga summit will be what is omitted. The EU-NATO relationship, for example, will not feature prominently in any of the summit's proceedings, partly because tensions surrounding that relationship remain so high and neither the EU nor NATO appears to have fresh ideas for how to address them. Similarly, and almost ironically, many of the toughest issues associated with NATO's military transformation – Allied Command Transformation, transformation concepts and defence planning – will also be left off the summit's agenda. Finally, because non-NATO members were not invited to this summit, the NATO-Russia relationship will not play a major role in Riga. All of these issues, however, have the potential to shape significantly NATO's future success. As such, NATO should make these three areas the centrepiece of its next summit agenda in 2008 or 2009.

NATO-EU Relations

Most members of these two organizations agree that the relationship is plagued by mistrust, unhealthy competition, and information-sharing problems, but neither NATO nor the EU has stepped forward to solve the problems. Given the long list of competing priorities inside each organization and the deep political differences among members on whether and how to strengthen EU-NATO ties, a degree of stalemate is understandable. In the long term, however, neither organization can afford inaction or inattention. With nineteen nations in a congruent geopolitical space that share multiple common interests and challenges, EU-NATO cooperation is both unavoidable and essential.

In the short term, major changes to the EU-NATO relationship will be difficult. However, a number of pragmatic, small-scale initiatives could be launched in the next year, including enhanced cooperation between NATO and the European Defence Agency; monthly meetings between the NATO Secretary-General and his EU counterpart, Javier Solana, to coordinate policies on pressing issues such as counter-terrorism and reconstruction

operations; and a joint working group to examine the consequences and benefits of defence integration (such as pooling, specialization, or multinational procurement).

Transforming for Tomorrow

The Riga summit is being billed as a 'transformation summit' at a time when NATO's fledgling agent for change, Allied Command Transformation (ACT), is clearly experiencing difficulties in implementing its vision within the Alliance. This seems largely because of the harsh realities of NATO's current operational environment. The Alliance is struggling to meet the political, operational and financial challenges of operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Under such conditions, many Allies wonder if it is prudent to divert scarce political and financial resources to experiment with novel technologies and operational concepts. The concerns are understandable, but the hard truth remains that transformation is an existential imperative. If NATO does not succeed in creating a culture of ongoing transformation and the capabilities that it needs to meet twenty-first-century challenges, it will go out of business.

Russia

Russia was not invited to Riga, and as a result the NATO-Russia relationship will not feature prominently on the summit's agenda. Russia will, however, be a factor in many of the questions and deliberations at the summit. Although few would call Russia a twenty-first-century superpower, it still possesses a large nuclear arsenal and has great influence in world politics on multiple fronts. Cooperation with Russia should therefore be of great importance to NATO. To underline the importance of cooperation, the Alliance should make 2007 a special 'Russia year' by celebrating the fifth anniversary of the NATO-Russia Council or the tenth anniversary of the Founding Act.

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