

Managing Expectations for NATO's Istanbul Summit

June 23, 2004

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In the course of just a few months, NATO has dramatically transformed its image from an outdated and unwieldy tool of the Cold War to today's modern miracle worker. Not only have the calls for NATO to assume responsibility for all military and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan grown louder, policymakers and the press have suggested that NATO go into Iraq. Others, like Senator Richard Lugar, have suggested NATO begin preparing to take on a peacekeeping role in a future Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. Even Secretary Rumsfeld, who coolly declined NATO's offers of support after the 9/11 attacks, is now suggesting that NATO expand its role in the Middle East by transforming its Mediterranean Dialogue to a formal partnership program. But today's NATO enthusiasts should be cautious about building up high and unattainable expectations for the Istanbul Summit. NATO lacks both the political will and capabilities to take on such tall orders and desperately needs to focus on the three basic questions of resources, rules, and relationships.

Despite more than 2,000 helicopters and 1.4 million troops in Europe, NATO members recently struggled to send a handful of helicopters and a few medical units to Afghanistan to expand the alliance's mission there. The delay was a result of a lack of political will and contingency funding, problems with force generation, and inadequate long-term planning. This struggle emphasizes why NATO must put more energy into finding the resources to strengthen the capabilities of its member states.

NATO has already spent years committing itself to improving member states' capabilities. The Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI) was launched in 1999 among the pomp and circumstance of the 50th Anniversary Summit in Washington. Three years later, when it became clear that most of the list of 59 improvements had failed to be realized, the alliance launched another initiative – the Prague Capabilities Commitments, a streamlined version of DCI that was intended to be more realistic. Despite good intentions, the PCC has also failed to produce any concrete action, which is why NATO urgently needs to focus once again on the question of resources at the upcoming summit.

Assuming that NATO can find an answer to its declining capabilities, the next challenge will be to determine when and how to use its rapid response force (which it is still in the process of standing up). Is the NATO response force intended to be used in post-conflict situations only? Can it be used as a conflict prevention instrument? How will decisions be taken to stand up this force? The Istanbul Summit should capitalize on the opportunity to sketch out the ground rules well before the force is fully operational.

Finally, NATO needs to strengthen its relationship with the EU. The two institutions are at long last talking to each other after operating in separate orbits for decades. And talking isn't all they are doing. NATO and the EU conducted their first joint exercise in 2003. There also seems to be significant progress on addressing the question of burdensharing with the signing of the Berlin Plus

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agreement, which allows the EU to utilize NATO military capabilities. But American policymakers and other non-EU members are still unclear when and how that agreement should be used in the future. NATO and the EU should use the upcoming summit to craft a joint declaration that clearly outlines a division of labor for both organizations and focuses their relationship on key issues such as counterterrorism, WMD, and regions like the Middle East.

Only after the core questions of resources, rules, and relationships have been addressed, can the alliance move forward with some of the proposals currently being floated in national capitals. NATO has done a remarkable job of transforming itself in recent years, successfully refuting those who claim that the alliance is dead. As it continues this process of transformation – which will likely take us well into the next decade – the alliance must avoid strategic overload. Tackling today's security threats requires that NATO simultaneously “do” and “transform” at the same time. But doing too much could also halt NATO's transformation agenda.

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