

Now comes the hard part

NATO after the Lisbon summit

Leo Michel

When NATO heads of state and government agreed at their April 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit to launch preparation of a new Strategic Concept, few commentators appreciated the risky nature of the exercise.

On the one hand, NATO was busier than ever, implementing decisions agreed *by consensus* among all 28 members. These included, for example: conducting operations ranging from counterinsurgency in Afghanistan to peacekeeping in Kosovo to anti-piracy off the coast of Somalia; managing strained relations with Russia following its August 2008 intervention in Georgia; and rebalancing its capabilities to deal with non-conventional threats as well as territorial defence. On the other hand, by commissioning a new look at long-term strategy, leaders of the Alliance implicitly conceded that its many activities apparently lacked a coherent and convincing rationale. Moreover, some security affairs *cognoscenti* feared that re-examining the Alliance's core missions, structures, and tools could open multiple Pandora's boxes – such as differences over the need for UN authorisation for NATO military operations, the role of nuclear weapons in the Alliance, and NATO's relationship to the European Union's emerging security and defence policy – that had been difficult to close during contentious negotiations over the 1999 Strategic Concept.

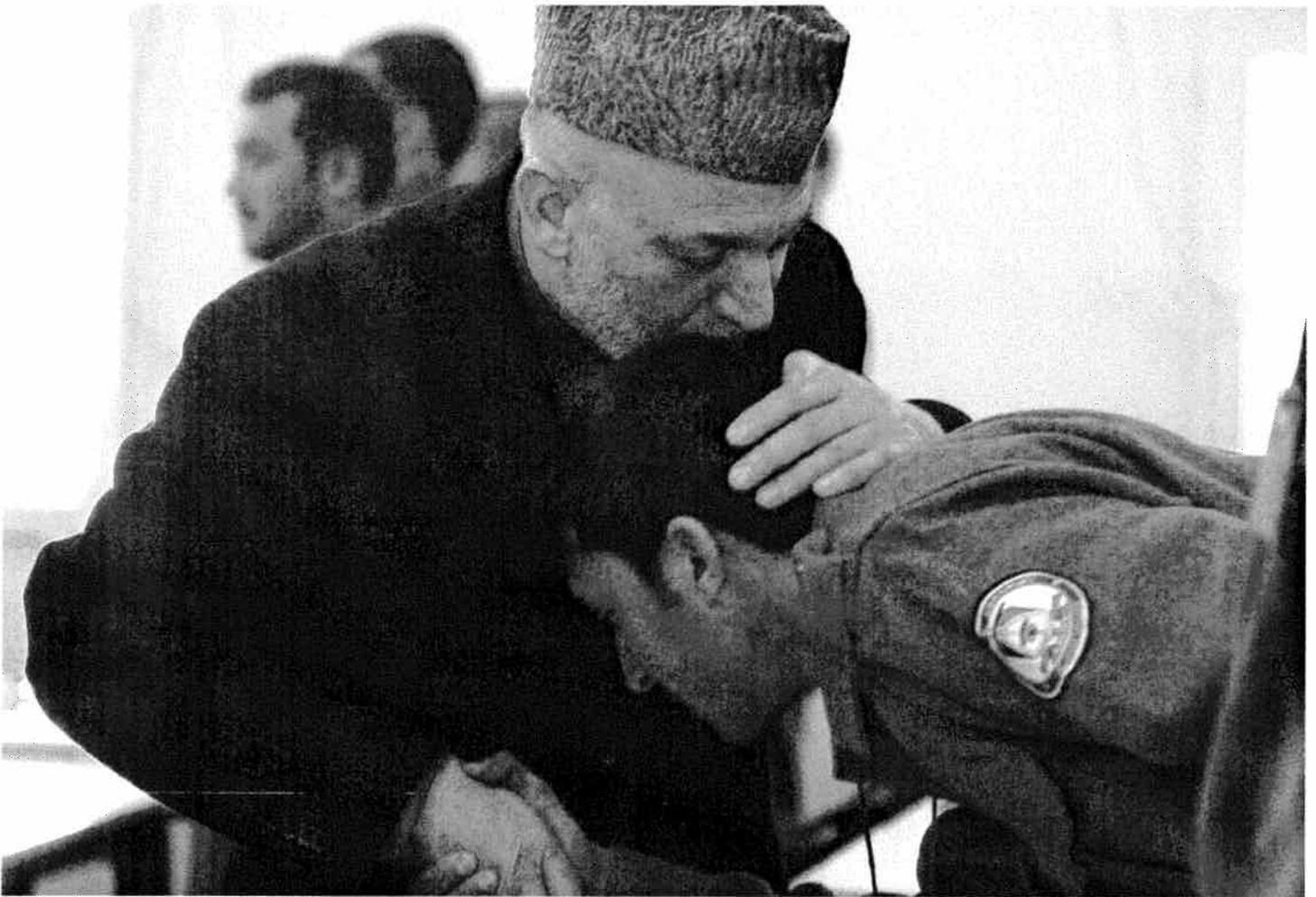
Fortunately, the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit also set in motion an unprecedented approach to writing a Strategic Concept. In their past iterations, such documents were mostly products of "in house" deliberations among a relatively small group of senior government officials. For this effort, however, a twelve-person Group of Experts, selected by the NATO Secretary General Anders

Fogh Rasmussen and chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, found multiple ways – from large conferences to small seminars in several countries to the use of social networks – to engage a wide spectrum of civilian and military officials, parliamentarians, independent researchers, opinion leaders, and publics across the Euro-Atlantic community. This helped build support for the new concept among those whose voices, votes, and resources would be critical to maintain Alliance solidarity in deeds as well as declarations. Other factors helped as well, including Secretary General Rasmussen's somewhat controversial insistence on "holding the pen" and expediting the drafting and approval process.

But now comes the hard part: moving from the Strategic Concept's affirmations of NATO's core tasks and principles (defence and deterrence, security through crisis management, and promoting international security through cooperation) to implementing concrete actions to meet current challenges and prepare for future, hard to predict contingencies. Several areas deserve special attention.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the caldron where, for many Americans, NATO's solidarity and effectiveness will be severely tested in the com-



ing years. European and American leaders broadly agree that if Afghanistan were to become a failed state, terrorist networks would re-establish themselves there, posing an increased threat to the European and American homelands. At Lisbon, Allied leaders joined with those of twenty other countries contributing to ISAF to “reaffirm our enduring commitment to Afghanistan’s security and stability.”

However, with few exceptions, public support for the Afghanistan mission is generally lower and eroding faster in Europe than in the United States. Allies and partner countries in ISAF expressed support for President Karzai’s objective for Afghan forces to lead and conduct security operations in all provinces by the end of 2014, but this does not constitute a pledge by those countries to stay in Afghanistan until then – much less beyond. Indeed, as ISAF gradually passes the lead for security operations in selected provinces and districts to Afghan forces beginning in early 2011, pressure likely will build within several troop contributing nations now deployed in those areas (mostly in the north and west) to reduce their footprint rather than shift troops to training and mentoring functions, which clearly are not risk-free.

The danger, of course, is that during the 2011-2014 transition period, the operational burdens and risks might fall even more disproportionately on those forces now deployed in the vola-

tile southern and eastern regions. Presumably, this is not what American defence officials have in mind when they advocate an “in together, out together” approach to the NATO effort. Meanwhile, the precarious situation in Pakistan could heighten friction among the Allies, especially if some conclude that U.S. pressure against extremist sanctuaries is hindering more than helping chances for a regional settlement.

Russia

Regarding Russia, the new Strategic Concept, Lisbon Summit Declaration, and NATO-Russia Council Joint Statement correctly stress the importance of improved dialogue and practical cooperation to meet common security interests, ranging from counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and counter-piracy to non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. New arrangements to facilitate transit of non-lethal ISAF goods through Russian territory are a tangible sign of the improved relations between NATO and Russia, as is the agreement to “discuss pursuing missile defense cooperation.”

Nevertheless, realising NATO’s declared goal of a “true strategic partnership” with Russia will not be easy. The Russian actions in Georgia continue to sow suspicion of Moscow’s attitude toward its closest neighbours and willingness to abide by its international

commitments. Similarly, Russia's continued suspension of its CFE Treaty obligations and refusal to address the overall disparity in non-strategic nuclear weapons stoke Allied concerns. And notwithstanding the more positive tone of Russian statements at Lisbon regarding possible collaboration on missile defence, it remains to be seen if Russia's long-term intention is to develop a cooperative architecture that does not interfere with NATO's legitimate and necessary autonomy, including in command and control functions, to defend its territory and population from the growing ballistic missile threat.

Capabilities

Delivering the capabilities needed to meet NATO's agreed roles and missions, as set out in the new Strategic Concept, will be another difficult task. The "critical capabilities package" endorsed by heads of state and government is a credible attempt to ensure that priority needs for current operations (such as countering improvised explosive devices) and emerging threats (such as defence against cyber threats) are actually delivered to the Alliance within its agreed budget ceilings. The planned "end-to-end rationalization review of all structures engaged in NATO capability development," if combined with promised reforms in the management of NATO's common funding, should help to produce a better match between resources and requirements.

Still, the results of previous summit-approved efforts – for example, the Defense Capabilities Initiative of 1999 and Prague Capabilities Commitment of 2002 – were disappointing, at best, and the economic environment faced by most Allies is measurably worse today than it was a decade ago. All Allies will face tough choices between supporting current operations and investment in new capabilities; in some cases, demographic trends also will make it increasingly hard to maintain the desired volunteer force levels. Moreover, even if the Pentagon fails to obtain its target of one per cent real growth in overall defence spending – and some in the new Congress will push for actual reductions – the relative disparity between U.S. defence expenditures (approximately 4.5 per cent of GDP) and the average expenditure of the 27 other Allied nations (around 1.5 per cent of GDP) is likely to grow, given projected cutbacks in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and many smaller countries.

Over time, fiscal constraints might intersect in significant ways with sensitive policy issues discussed at Lisbon. In post-Lisbon briefings, for example, American officials have emphasised that the U.S. "Phased Adaptive Approach" (PAA) – comprised of deployments of increasingly capable sea- and land-based missile interceptors and a range of sensors – will be the U.S. "contribution" to a NATO-wide system to defend against the growing ballistic missile threats. To integrate that "contribution" into a NATO-wide

command, control and communications (C3) system is estimated to cost about 200 million Euros over ten years. But that figure pales in comparison with the U.S. costs of providing the Aegis missile cruisers, sea- and land-based missiles, and other C3 and sensor components of the PAA. One might wonder whether a U.S. Congress that is increasingly focused on cutting the deficit will agree to what some members likely will argue is another example of lopsided burden sharing. In fact, some Democratic as well as Republican members are already clamouring to significantly reduce the U.S. military presence in Europe (approximately 78,000 mili-

tary personnel) based in part on their perception that Europeans can and should pay more for their own defence.

Similarly, the new Strategic Concept affirms that "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance" and, as such,

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"will ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements."

NATO leaders agreed separately to conduct a comprehensive review of deterrence and defence that will include NATO's nuclear posture. Yet, according to credible press reports, some of the Allies that currently maintain dual-capable aircraft (i.e. aircraft capable of performing nuclear as well as conventional roles) and/or have small numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons stationed on their territory are more inclined than others to reduce or eliminate their direct participation in "nuclear burden sharing." Faced with budget cutbacks, some of those Allies might argue that investing in new capabilities to maintain dual-capable aircraft for the foreseeable future would represent an unwise allocation of resources, given NATO leaders' statement in Lisbon that they "will seek to create the conditions for further reductions [of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe] in the future." Others might see this as a convenient excuse to shed nuclear-sharing roles, which are not politically popular.

NATO-EU relations

Finally, on NATO-EU relations, the new Strategic Concept contains cogent and compelling reasons for improving their "strategic partnership" in language that goes beyond its 1999 predecessor. It

acknowledges, for example, that the EU is “a unique and essential partner for NATO” – due, in part, to the fact that they share common values and a majority of members – and that a “stronger and more capable European defense” benefits the Alliance as well. It also calls for enhanced practical cooperation in planning and conducting operations, broadened political consultations, and better cooperation in capability development.

Truth be told, however, these have been well-worn themes in transatlantic discussions over the recent years, and there is little evidence to date that the Lisbon summit did much to advance their practical implementation. The Lisbon summit declaration did give a nod to unspecified “recent initiatives” from several Allies and Secretary General Rasmussen; the latter was “encouraged” to continue work with the EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, and report to the North Atlantic Council in advance of the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting next April.¹

Still, while several avenues for low-profile but beneficial practical cooperation exist and could be enhanced, the fact is that absent a much improved and high-level agreement to give direction, substance and structure to the NATO-EU relationship at all layers, the organisations and their member states will continue to underperform in their attempts to anticipate, prevent and, where necessary, effectively respond to a wide spectrum of crises.

To be sure, Afghanistan, Russia, capabilities development, and relations with the EU are not – and will not be – the only challenges faced by NATO in the coming years. Iran’s reported efforts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability and continuing ballistic missile programmes, increasingly sophisticated attempts by terrorists to mount mass casualty attacks, and cyber threats posed by state and non-state actors alike pose real and serious threats to Alliance members, even if NATO might not be the appropriate body, in every specific instance, to mobilise or lead an international response. Hence, the new Strategic Concept correctly underscores that

“NATO remains the unique and essential transatlantic forum for consultations on all matters that affect the territorial integrity, political independence and security of its members, as set out in Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Any security issue of interest to any Ally can be brought to the NATO table, to share information, exchange views and, where appropriate, forge common approaches.”

In the end, this reminder of NATO’s “unique and essential” nature may be among the most important legacies of the Lisbon summit. After all, close security bonds among the United States, Canada and the European Allies, anchored in NATO since 1949, have survived many difficult tests. Ultimately, the Alliance remained strong because its members did not allow their differences ever to rival their overriding shared interests and values. With operations such as Afghanistan clearly putting new and intense strain on NATO, it was not surprising that in the run-up to Lisbon, many were asking: Will the past be prologue? The answer, unfortunately, is conditional: yes – if Allies muster the political will to fulfil their pledges to themselves and to each other.

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1. In a September 15, 2010 news conference, Rasmussen stated: “In concrete terms I have suggested that the European Union conclude an arrangement between Turkey and the European Union Defence Agency. I’ve also suggested that the European Union concludes the annual security agreement with Turkey. And finally I have suggested that the European Union involves non-EU contributors in decision-making when it comes to EU operations like the one in Bosnia. It would be equivalent to how we do it in NATO. We have 19 ISAF partners outside NATO and we include them in decision making. I think the European Union should do the same when it comes to EU operations, like the one in Bosnia. By the way, Turkey is the second largest contributor to the EU operation in Bosnia. And then of course, in exchange, all NATO allies should recognize that all EU members participate in such EU-NATO cooperation.”

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