



A Reset at Lisbon?*

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NATO summits are rarely exciting events. Yet, past weekend's meeting in Lisbon had been billed by some as the most significant such meeting since the end of the Cold War. NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called it the most important summit of the Alliance's 61-year history. Ivo Daalder, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, was equally ebullient. At Lisbon, Daalder argued, NATO finally entered the twenty-first century by recognizing that the major security threats to its member states had dramatically changed.

The changing nature of security was indeed reflected in the Alliance's new Strategic Concept, a much-awaited, albeit inevitably sterile, document. It was also evident in discussions about the meaning of Article 5 (NATO's collective defense clause) in an age when conventional attacks against NATO territory are highly unlikely. Instead, NATO's collective defense planning should be directed against potential terrorist attacks, cyber attacks, attacks on energy infrastructure or piracy on the high seas.

But the real meat of the summit focused on two items: NATO's future role in Afghanistan and the Alliance's relationship with Russia. Both issues reflect how much NATO has changed since it adopted its previous Strategic Concept in 1999.

On Afghanistan, NATO confirmed that it was in it for the long haul. To be sure, NATO and the Afghan government signed an agreement to transfer the responsibility for the country's security from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Kabul by 2014. The first phase of the planned transfer is set to begin already next year. But Secretary General Rasmussen also stressed that NATO would not leave behind a "security vacuum." In four years time NATO may no longer be engaged in combat missions. But training and logistical support will continue.

The significance of the agreement goes beyond reassuring Hamid Karzai's troubled government in Kabul. It has implications beyond Afghanistan. The Lisbon summit essentially confirmed NATO's role as a global security manager, willing to engage in virtually open-ended commitments far beyond its borders. 'Out-of-area crises' -



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conflicts far beyond the geographic boundaries of the member states - are firmly on NATO's radar screen.

What then of Russia and NATO? At Lisbon one could observe a smiling President Dmitri Medvedev rubbing shoulders with Rasmussen, Obama, and others. There was an agreement about enhanced Russian logistical support for NATO troops in Afghanistan. Russia lifted its previous objections to NATO's decision to develop a missile defense system to protect Europe's territory and population from ballistic missile attack. Moreover, Medvedev agreed to a plan for Russia and NATO to study missile defense cooperation and how the two might eventually coordinate their systems. The tension that followed Russia's 2008 intervention of Georgia - an eager candidate for NATO membership - appears long forgotten.

In fact, the warming of Russia-NATO relationship has been in the making for quite some time. Most significantly, American-Russian relations have improved significantly since Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009. The clearest sign of the rapprochement came in April of this year, when Presidents Obama and Medvedev signed a new START agreement, pledging to cut down their respective nuclear arsenals by a third. Throughout 2010 the Russian president had similarly sunny meetings with key European leaders, including Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel. The new Strategic Concept refers to a "true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia."

But while a reset of NATO-Russia relations was evident for all to see, none of the agreements reached at Lisbon should be interpreted as a prelude to full and unfettered co-operation. Before anyone starts expecting Russia to send a membership application to NATO headquarters in Brussels, it is advisable to keep in mind a few caveats.

Most importantly, one should not forget that Russia-NATO relations remain, to a large extent, subservient to Russian-American relations. And in that realm things remain potentially volatile.

Russia and the United States may have signed a new START agreement earlier this year. But its ratification is still pending. The recent elections in the United States have raised doubts about the ability of the Obama administration to assure adequate support at home. Such things have happened before: in 1979 the Carter administration signed the SALT II agreement but failed to assure its ratification by the U.S. Senate. Even before the 2010 elections Republican lawmakers had complicated the ratification by including 30 amendments to the treaty signed by Obama.

Russia, for its part, is unlikely to ratify the START treaty before the United States. Earlier this month the Duma postponed ratification. On Saturday President Medvedev joined Obama in urging U.S. lawmakers to act fast. He added that Russians were ready



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to act "in a symmetrical way." And if the Senate did not ratify START? It would be "very unpleasant," Medvedev warned.

On Missile Defense, the current NATO version is acceptable to Moscow because it appears a rather diluted version of the original Bush plans. But a notable disagreement remains. While most alliance members (save Turkey) were willing to identify Iran's potential nuclear arsenal as *the* future threat, Russia balked. Thus, Iran was not singled out as the source of NATO concerns that, to Americans and others, it truly is.

In addition, Medvedev made it clear that his country expects full exchange of information if it is to co-operate with NATO. This, clearly, left the door open for a later return to a more antagonistic Russian attitude. 'Full exchange' is, after all, a relative concept.

Ultimately, the factors that are most likely to limit the extent of the sudden love affair between NATO and Russia are historical and psychological. Russia is a traditional great power yearning for a return to its status - in the Soviet days - as the world's other superpower. However fanciful such a desire may seem, it goes a long way to explaining why Russia is extremely guarded about its dealings with NATO.

NATO is, after all, the alliance that kicked Russia when it was down. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the chaotic internal state of Russia in the 1990s all amounted to a colossal humiliation of post-Cold War Russia. But to make matters worse from their perspective, these events took place at the same time as NATO expanded rapidly and started flexing its muscles in out-of-area conflicts in the wars of the former Yugoslavia.

Today, though, NATO faces a more self-confident Russia, secure in the knowledge that on a number of key it is dealing from a position of strength. The intervention in Georgia clearly set the limits, for now, to further NATO expansion. NATO's troubles in Afghanistan and its concern about Iran's nuclear program, have placed Russia in a position where it is needed. Moscow can help or hurt NATO operations in Afghanistan. And without Russian support any efforts at curbing Iran's ambitions short of military action are likely to go nowhere.

NATO's Lisbon summit was in many ways a landmark event. It confirmed NATO's post-Cold War transformation from a regional defense alliance to a transatlantic security organization. It stressed that the major future security threats were most non-conventional and transnational in nature. It reaffirmed America's leading role. And, it offered hope for a future NATO-Russia security cooperation. Lisbon symbolized the 'reset' of this relationship.



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Yet, despite all the hyperbolic rhetoric, the summit did not change the world. National ambitions and concerns - be they Russian, American or European - still overshadow NATO's everyday activities and future direction. What Lisbon proved, though, was the Alliance's remarkable ability to re-invent itself. The organization that was - in the words of the first Secretary General, Lord Ismay - created "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down" would not be recognizable to its founders. That is ultimately why NATO remains history's longest-lasting - and perhaps most successful - military alliance.

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