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Obama's NATO: A New Transatlantic Partnership?¹

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NATO turned sixty on April 4, 2009. With an internationally popular American president in town, the occasion turned into a festival of renewal and unity of purpose. As Obama put it in his speech at Strasbourg: "Today I'm confident that we took a substantial step forward to renewing our alliance to meet the challenges of our time." Perhaps. After almost a decade of acrimony there is plenty of need for renewal. In particular, it is high time for Washington to repair the damage caused to transatlantic relations by the Bush administration's numerous snubs. The sweet-talking Obama is clearly the man smooth the way for a new kind of NATO.

But the summit also highlighted an uncomfortable fact. No matter who the U.S. president happens to be, alliance members are bound to disagree on how to meet those challenges. It has always been so. NATO's history is filled with crises.

Still, today's challenges are not the same as those during the Cold War or the 1990s. And whether one buys even half of the high-flying rhetoric emanating from both sides of the Atlantic or not, "change" – the great buzzword of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign – is everywhere in NATO.

Much of this is positive.

Croatia and Albania have joined, pushing the membership up to 28. The addition of these Balkan countries signifies an important step towards stabilization of Europe's most volatile region. The potential future membership of the Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro would further strengthen NATO's post-Cold War role as Europe's pacifier. A decade after the Kosovo conflict this is surely welcome news.

France is fully back after a 43-year hiatus. Obama had little to do with the final reversal of de Gaulle's rebellion in NATO's integrated military structure earlier this year. But the popularity of the 44th president surely made it easier for Nicolas Sarkozy and Bernhard Kouchner to cast aside domestic criticism.

There was – in part thanks to Obama's behind-the-scenes diplomacy – unanimity over the election of Denmark's Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as the next General Secretary of NATO. In a parallel universe this might have been inconsequential. But Obama has made reaching out to the Muslim world one of his priorities. Thus, his support for a leader who had angered Muslims around the world by supporting the right to caricature the prophet Mohammad – as was done in some Danish newspapers in 2005-6 – was potentially damaging. With a well placed trip to Turkey a few days later and frequent public reminders that his middle name is Hussein, Obama managed to soften the blow.

Further, there was agreement about a need to repair relations with Russia, strained over Moscow's 2008 war with Georgia and the uncomfortable European dependency on Russian energy. A number of Europeans, not least the Germans, will be relieved about this development. Although Moscow (as well as Beijing) have refused to outright condemn the latest North Korean missile tests, the threat of a 'new Cold War' has, at least for the time being, abated.



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The rhetoric has been reassuring. "When it comes to Afghanistan, this summit and this alliance has delivered," NATO's outgoing Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declared. Others agreed, taking turns to praise Obama's new approach to Afghanistan. But they did so with a caveat summed up by the French president. "We completely support the new American strategy in Afghanistan," exhorted Nikolas Sarkozy.

As far as the Europeans are concerned the new strategy is America's. While Obama referred to Europe's "strong down payment" in Afghanistan, his words could not mask a more sobering reality. At the Strasbourg summit European leaders agreed to provide only token practical support. In 2009, America's NATO allies will be sending up to 5,000 more trainers and police – on short-term assignments – to help monitor the Afghan elections and train the country's military. In contrast, Americans will be increasing their troop levels by more than 50%: from 38,000 to roughly 60,000.

There is a danger for the Obama administration here. Instead of 'Afghanistanizing' the conflict, it may well be on the slippery path towards Americanizing it. The ones who are likely to pay the ultimate price? The Afghan people, who are unlikely to experience even a semblance of stability any time soon. Instead, they will struggle for survival as a resurgent Taliban, an incompetent local government, and a well-meaning but ill-equipped foreign force exchange control over various parts of territory.

In many ways Obama's NATO will be a different organization from the one his predecessor left behind. But one central fact has not changed. A proclaimed unity of purpose does not automatically translate into an agreement over policy, particularly on issues considered 'out-of-area' (as Afghanistan so manifestly is). Nor is there anything surprising about it: NATO is still fundamentally a regional security alliance not a global peacemaker. Not even eight years of Obama is likely to change that.

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