
Obama and NATO: Facing the Afghan Challenge and Russian Resurgence

ALEX TIERSKY

Two wars dominate the strategic landscape confronting NATO as a new U.S. administration takes office. The August 2008 war between future NATO member Georgia and a resurgent Russia demonstrated Moscow's determination to use force to defend its regional hegemony, marking the nadir of a steady decline in relations between NATO and Russia. NATO's attempts to respond revealed deep divisions among its members' willingness to confront Russia. Meanwhile, NATO is struggling to deliver on its commitment to provide a safe and secure environment in Afghanistan in the face of an increasingly deadly insurgency.

In combination, these are the most significant political-military challenges the Alliance has faced since the end of the cold war. Are they likely to cause irresolvable and insurmountable divisions within the Alliance, signaling the beginning of the "death of NATO" or at least rendering the Alliance "obsolete"?¹ The Obama administration's approach toward NATO

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on both of these conflicts will largely determine the future of the Alliance. Obama's team will profit from a unique series of opportunities in the next two years if it demonstrates leadership that will ensure the continuation of the security benefits NATO has provided to its member states for the past 60 years. But it will first have to understand the nature of NATO's engagement in both areas.

NATO'S TURBULENT RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The story of NATO's post-cold war relationship with Russia is one of sustained mistrust and conflicting worldviews, punctuated by occasional periods of hopefulness for what was hailed as a "strategic partnership," but ultimately ruptured by the Georgian war of 2008.² After a period of tentative rapprochements in the immediate post-cold war period, the relation-

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ship's high water mark was the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997 and the creation of institutional arrangements that would eventually become the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.

Unfortunately, a full decade of efforts failed to bring the sides together in a meaningful way. Moscow's principal concern remains that the institutional arrangements, such as the NATO-Russia Council, do not include

Russia as an equal, and that Moscow therefore remains powerless to truly influence NATO behavior. More than anything else, this was the reason why Russian leaders from Yeltsin to Putin periodically raised the prospect of full Russian membership in NATO, a proposal that has recently been replaced by a new concept—the creation of a new European security architecture that would replace NATO altogether.

NATO members' concerns about Russian foreign and security policy include intrusions on their sovereign airspace by Russian military aircraft, extensive Russian military exercises, ballistic missile tests, and a surge in defense spending, including a 27 percent increase announced for 2009. This military assertiveness was matched by Russian Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin's confrontational diplomacy at NATO headquarters.

For its part, Moscow's list of grievances include the West's recognition of the independence of Kosovo, the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic

Missile (ABM) Treaty, the proposed installation of U.S. missile defense sites in Europe, and compliance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

NYET TO NATO ENLARGEMENT

Even within this extensive list of frictions, no issue has been more contentious than NATO's invitation of new member states geographically closer and closer to Russian borders. Russia saw the successive stages of NATO enlargement, especially when coupled with an agreement to give U.S. forces access to military bases in Romania and Bulgaria, as clear signs of a Western "strategic encirclement" policy toward Russia.

And no prospect was more galling to Moscow than the possibility that Mikheil Saakashvili, a Western-educated lawyer elected President of Georgia in the November 2003 Rose Revolution, would lead his country

into NATO. Georgia was viewed, especially in Washington, as a potential key to moving this strategically important region closer to the West. Tbilisi was hailed by the Bush administration as a vanguard in the spread of democracy and free-market ideas, potentially pairing with the post-Orange Revolution Ukraine to make major, and possibly irreversible, strides for the "freedom agenda" in former Soviet states.

With strong backing from the United States, Georgia and Ukraine became candidates for NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), a program that intensifies cooperation between the Alliance and a candidate country in order to prepare them for eventual—but not guaranteed—membership. Moscow's extremely harsh rhetoric on any such step was repeated often and at every level.

The issue came to a head at NATO's Bucharest Summit of April 2008, where Moscow's opposition, among other factors, caused NATO nations to be divided on the MAP invitation. As many as ten nations, led by France and Germany, opposed MAP access for Georgia and Ukraine, suggesting that this would unnecessarily provoke Moscow and that the candidates were not ready. The Summit's declaration delivered a mixed message: Georgia and Ukraine were not invited to participate in the

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MAP's reform and cooperation program, but were promised that they "will become members of NATO"—with no time horizon attached to this commitment.³

THE GUNS OF AUGUST SOUND AGAIN

The relationship, such as it was, between NATO and Russia was decimated by the eruption of the August 2008 war. At the time of this writing, the details of the events of August 7–8 continue to be the subject of fundamental disagreement among the warring parties. However, the physical outcome of the conflict is disputed by no one: Georgia, a key

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country in what analyst Ron Asmus had called "the new flank of the Euro-Atlantic community," and a country hailed as a future NATO member in the Bucharest Declaration, saw its military routed on all fronts and its Western-funded infrastructure left in shambles.⁴

The territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognized as part of Georgia's territory by the international community, gained Russian-enforced independence and recognition from Russia. Two hundred ceasefire monitors were deployed by the European Union to verify the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Georgian civilian infrastructure was also attacked and a vital energy corridor was threatened.⁵

Beyond the immediate effects of the war, it was clear that a new geopolitical situation had emerged in Eurasia. Many believed that a resurgent Russia, flush with currency reserves from its petrol industry and cognizant of its thousands of nuclear weapons, had become a revisionist power under Vladimir Putin, intent on overturning the post-cold war settlement of 1991 to assert its privileged position both locally and globally. In this narrative, Russia under Putin sought to "punish" the United States and NATO for a number of transgressions ("humiliations" in the Russian lexicon) ranging from the NATO membership promises to Georgia and Ukraine, to the proposed U.S. missile defense deployment in Europe.

Of course, Georgia was far from the only state whose security was directly impacted by the August war. Other states on Russia's periphery also faced a moment of geopolitical uncertainty, perhaps none more so than Ukraine, which has seen the legitimacy of its very statehood questioned by Putin. The Georgia war spilled into Ukrainian politics directly,

where an already tense relationship between the leaders of the Orange Revolution was pushed to the breaking point.⁹ Ukraine's situation remains tenuous: the region of Crimea, with its two-thirds Russian majority and home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, may be the spark that ignites a future crisis.

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NATO RESPONDS

As NATO considered its own response to the outbreak of war and the increased instability throughout the region, the lack of consensus evident at the Bucharest Summit was reaffirmed. Two broad camps within the Alliance held opposite interpretations of the implications of the conflict: one group of member states claimed that Georgia had been "abandoned" at Bucharest, while the other member states expressed vindication and relief that NATO had not been dragged into a war of which it wanted no part.

The United States, Canada, Britain, and the "new" NATO members of Eastern Europe saw Russian aggression as requiring a strong response, including an end to "business as usual" with Russia and a fast-tracking of relations with Georgia and Ukraine. Those who called for accelerated entry of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO wanted to safeguard the two countries from Russian military and political influence as well as signal to Russia that it would not have a veto over NATO decisions. A more cautious approach emerged from Western European countries including France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, which called for increased cooperation with Russia.¹⁰

NATO was eventually able to agree to condemn Russia's disproportionate use of force in the conflict and its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and it reaffirmed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity. The NATO secretary general and the North Atlantic Council (the member states' permanent representatives at the Brussels headquarters of the Alliance) all traveled to Tbilisi in a demonstration of solidarity and reaffirmed Georgia's NATO membership prospects.

NATO also suspended high-level meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and declared there could be "no business as usual," and a NATO-Georgia Commission was created in order to provide a more substantial institutional link. NATO also sent experts to evaluate the needs of the demolished Georgian military and pledged assistance in remedying those shortfalls. Indeed, Georgia's military, which was undergoing a massive

restructuring process when it was largely destroyed by Russian forces, may now be rebuilt and its soldiers equipped with NATO-standard gear, which would be a major boon to Tbilisi.¹¹

A POSSIBLE U.S. APPROACH

The current strategic context, as laid out above, leads to three interlocking challenges for the new U.S. administration as it formulates its NATO policies—all of which will ultimately have to be sold to NATO in order to gain consensus. It must first develop a coherent vision for NATO's relationship with Russia, particularly in the context of the Georgian war. It will also have to formulate a response to the membership aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine. Third, it should work to reevaluate NATO's defense plans and policies to reflect new priorities in the aftermath of the Georgian war.

However, the first step should be to minimize the damage to the Alliance itself, caused by a highly public division among Allies on the exact nature of the relationship with Georgia and Ukraine. The Alliance should lower the profile of the discussion on actual NATO membership for either country, and at the same time offer other kinds of links to these countries, such as expanding activities under the existing NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Councils. Such security cooperation would avoid a bumper-sticker propaganda point for the Russian hard-liners, while continuing to help develop the fundamental attributes in these countries through reform processes that would allow them to move toward meeting the criteria for NATO membership.

ON NATO-RUSSIA RELATIONS

On NATO's institutional relations with Russia, the Obama administration will first have to contend with renewed suggestions that, given the failures of the NATO-Russia Council to prevent disagreements on issues from Kosovo to NATO enlargement, only a major institutional overhaul of the European security architecture could possibly result in a productive relationship with Russia. Two ideas are worth mentioning here, both centered on an even tighter institutional embrace of Russia.

The first is a revival of the discussion to offer NATO membership

to Russia, if only to persuade Moscow that the Alliance poses no threat to Russia. As French political scientist Pierre Hassner recommends, “the West should announce its willingness, if and when Moscow overcomes its intoxication with unilateral shows of force, to reconsider Russia’s inclusion in a transformed NATO. Nothing less would remove the feeling of encirclement and encroachment shared by the majority of the Russian population.”¹² This idea resurfaces periodically—for example, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, former Secretary of State James Baker suggested membership be offered as a carrot to both reassure Moscow and encourage it along a continued path of reform.¹³ Indeed, some proponents of Russia’s entry into NATO suggest the offer be made in the full expectation that Russia would reject it out of hand, or find the implicit criteria of free markets, democracy, and rule of law set by NATO impossible to meet on any reasonable timeframe.¹⁴

The second option, preferred by the Russian leadership, is the replacement of NATO and other institutions with another, more inclusive security architecture in which Russia has a seat at the top table. The proposals put forward by President Medvedev remain vague and ill-defined; meanwhile, Russian behavior in Georgia has given its skeptics much reason to doubt the intent of the project. Faced with the August 2008 conflict and its aftermath, critics are likely to dismiss the Russian proposal as mere rhetoric, part and parcel of Moscow’s strategy of sowing division within the Atlantic Alliance wherever possible.¹⁵

The first proposal is unlikely to get enough traction to be seriously discussed at NATO headquarters under current circumstances. The second, however, would likely require the Obama administration to walk a tightrope: it must satisfy dialogued-minded allies that Washington is listening and willing to work toward resolving Russian concerns, but it must also remain firm enough to ensure that newly democratic nations understand they can count on American support.

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conducive to a renewed rapprochement. A recent *Economist* survey saw a country “beset by chronic and dangerous weaknesses”;¹⁶ the capital flight and declining prices of oil and gas and repeated stock market shocks due to the global economic slowdown make it clear that Russia remains “a

pretty dysfunctional bear” facing some significant problems of its own.¹⁷ And although the Russian military did conduct the largest demonstration of Russian military power since the end of the cold war, rapidly routing the Georgian forces and demonstrating its ability to successfully carry out a major operation in its “near abroad,” its performance underscored major shortcomings. Should Russia find itself in greater need of Western assistance in confronting its own problems, NATO might once again find a more willing partner on issues of common concern.

ON GEORGIA/UKRAINE

Of course, the Obama administration must not only have a Russia strategy for NATO, it must also have a clear vision for Georgia and Ukraine. Unfortunately, it is not likely that NATO nations will be able to come to a productive consensus on a comprehensive strategy toward this crucial region. However, the Western nations largely agree that allowing “spheres of influence” to return is unacceptable. Therefore, NATO’s own internal divisions should not condemn these states to permanent semi-independence and instability.

Thus, if in the current geopolitical situation, NATO simply is not the best equipped Euro-Atlantic institution to deliver the kinds of benefits sought by Western-leaning countries in the region, there may be a productive alternative that the Obama administration could consider. Indeed, the European Union, broker of the ceasefire agreement, has emerged as the less confrontational Euro-Atlantic institution in this context. While it works to address the extremely thorny issue of lessening its own dependence on Russian energy through diversification, Europe can also reach out to Ukraine and Georgia in a way that is both closed to NATO for the time being and less threatening to Russia.

Of course, a European public suffering from enlargement fatigue and a leadership still smarting from the defeat of the Lisbon Treaty will not be willing to consider EU membership for Georgia and Ukraine for the foreseeable future. However, measures short of membership such as deeper cooperation and the provision of economic benefits would allow those countries’ continued progression in their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This could prove especially effective if pursued in tandem with other regional initiatives such as the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, a regional security project proposed by Turkey that appears welcomed by all sides and is brokered by a uniquely influential player among Western countries in the region.¹⁸

ON NATO DEFENSE PLANS AND POLICIES

The war in Georgia also brought greater prominence to the ongoing sense of threat felt by some “new” NATO members vis-à-vis Russia. The Baltic states and Poland are among those in NATO that have consistently warned of potential Russian aggression. And in a troubling sign for the credibility of NATO’s Article V mutual defense guarantee, the Polish government went so far as to insist on the inclusion of a new defense commitment from the United States in the missile defense basing agreement it signed shortly after the Georgian war. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared that NATO would be too slow in coming to Poland’s defense in an attack, stating that the Alliance would take “days, weeks to start that machinery... Poland and the Poles do not want to be in alliances in which assistance comes at some point later—it is no good when assistance comes to dead people.”¹⁹

One of the first tasks for the Obama administration will therefore have to be rebuilding allies’ confidence that Article V is still valid today. One request from potentially threatened neighbors has been additional “contingency planning” and exercises featuring scenarios representing their territorial defense. Planning that even hints at potential conflict with Russia has been a taboo at the Alliance; no one has been willing to seriously countenance the idea of direct confrontation after the end of the cold war. The act of avoiding such plans was also intended as a confidence-building measure to reassure Moscow. However, in the wake of the Georgia conflict, persistent calls for such “contingency planning” have gained added traction.

Beyond planning, some have also questioned whether NATO still has the right tools to defend its territory. Indeed, some member states have begun to rethink the wisdom of the extensive post-cold war transformation of NATO’s military capabilities, which, under significant U.S. pressure, had moved from a decades-long focus on defending European territory from a Soviet assault to expeditionary operations “out of area.” Indeed, one analysis of the kinds of hardware needed to defend the states most concerned—fighter aircraft, maritime forces, and tank-killing airpower—warns that these capabilities have been severely underfunded and under-resourced across the major defense players in the Alliance, due to the near-total focus on counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁰

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NATO was reportedly considering how best to respond to such concerns, while avoiding moves that would feed into Russian nationalism and concerns about strategic encirclement. Experts disagree on the way forward, with Ron Asmus calling for building military infrastructure and reinforcement capability that would reassure the new members of the Alliance’s Article V commitments, and Julianne Smith rejecting such moves in favor of high-level visits and statements in order to avoid a likely Russian overreaction.²¹

Another concept reportedly under discussion is the development of a rapid-response force that could be deployed to nations under threat, not only as a potential combat element but also as a “tripwire” to signal to an aggressor that the Alliance was absolutely committed to the defense of a particular territory. Although NATO has struggled to increase rapid reaction forces on several previous occasions, this idea has the benefit of avoiding permanent deployments or infrastructure that could generate even more hostile responses from Russia.²²

The Obama administration will have to weigh these proposals carefully in order to find a solution that reassures potentially threatened NATO members, while avoiding undermining the critical role the Alliance plays in expeditionary operations. Indeed, a renewed emphasis on Article V, while certainly important, can almost certainly be done in concert with, rather than in opposition to, the transformation of the Alliance to address global security concerns at their source.

Finally, the Obama administration should also continue to push reluctant NATO member states toward a greater role for the Alliance in other

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critical areas whose importance was underscored by the Georgian conflict, including energy security and cyber-defenses. Given the dependence of most allies on Russian energy exports, this is a tremendously sensitive issue to navigate, one that has been discussed at NATO for years without consensus on any specific NATO role. President Obama

should call on his close working relationship with Senator Richard Lugar, one of the principal backers of an energy security mission for NATO, to further develop a NATO role in this area. In continuity with the Bush administration, Obama’s administration is likely to argue that it is in the Alliance’s interest to work toward a stable energy corridor for Caspian and Central Asian gas and oil to transit Georgia and the Black Sea toward Europe.²³

Cyber-defenses are also likely to continue their rise to the top of NATO's agenda, given not only their increasingly frequent occurrence but also their prominence in recent conflicts in which Russia has played a role. In addition to reports that the Georgia conflict involved a cyber-attack, Estonia was hit with a major cyber-attack in May 2007 during a political row with Moscow. The Obama administration should embrace and supplement the contributions of Estonia, a leader in online services, which made a prescient offer in 2004 to host a NATO Cyber-Defense Center to conduct training and share lessons learned.

NATO AT WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

President Obama's team will need to focus not only on the implications of events in the South Caucasus, but also devote full attention to the area of the Hindu Kush, where there is a second war shaping NATO: its ongoing engagement in Afghanistan. More than 50,000 NATO troops are fighting to provide a safe and secure environment for the Afghan people. The Obama administration will have to confront not only the tremendous challenges NATO is facing on the ground, but also the sharpening disagreements within its own halls over an equitable sharing of the burdens of the fight and the future of the mission.

The news from Afghanistan is not all bad; a great deal has been done for the Afghan people in the areas of health care, schooling, and democratic

reforms. However, an overall climate of insecurity continues to plague efforts to assist the central government's efforts to provide tangible benefits in many parts of the country. Spectacularly violent attacks and a sophisticated media strategy have helped the insurgency dominate news coverage in Western capitals, and support for the mission in many European countries has waned.

Adding to these concerns are increased troop casualties. In mid-2008, British and U.S. troops were being killed in Afghanistan at a rate higher than during the peak of the Iraq war.²⁴ French troops suffered their greatest military loss in twenty-five years in an August ambush by insurgent forces that left ten dead and twenty-one wounded.²⁵

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In addition, the conflict has generated divisions within the Alliance on questions of burden-sharing. Countries fighting in the more violent areas of the south and east of Afghanistan—the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands—have accused others of being unwilling to share in the life-and-death risks inherent in such a conflict.

It has become clear that NATO's system of force generation and deployment does not match the requirements of the conflict in Afghanistan. The commanders' repeated pleas for additional resources, be they personnel or equipment, and the flexibility to use them appropriately, indicate that the Alliance is still struggling to match resources to stated goals and outcomes. Operations continue to be hampered by shortfalls in filling even the minimum military requirements, let alone reinforcements, in both troop numbers and critical equipment such as helicopters that can handle the rigors of the Afghan landscape and climate. Despite several announced marginal increases of forces throughout 2008, troop numbers were not close to what commanders in the field were seeking.

Exacerbating these problems are the political restrictions—"caveats," in the NATO jargon—that some nations place on their national contingents in Afghanistan. These restrictions govern the tasks troops are allowed to perform and the areas in which they can operate. Caveats could, for instance, prohibit a given unit from conducting nighttime operations. The fundamental problem with these restrictions is that they force the riskiest and often most deadly missions—such as nighttime operations—onto those national contingents that are not prohibited from carrying them out.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander, U.S. General David McKiernan, argued to a delegation of visiting NATO parliamentarians in October 2008 that NATO had an inherent advantage over any adversary in Afghanistan through intelligence, speed, firepower, logistics, and other attributes. However, national caveats reduce those advantages and put NATO soldiers at higher risk, particularly given the fact that insurgents are fully aware of national caveats and plan their operations accordingly.²⁶

Another thorny issue facing NATO with which the Obama administration will have to contend is the Alliance's involvement in the fight against the narcotics trade. Afghanistan's opium economy is not only providing funds to the insurgents, it is also contributing to the crippling of the structures of the Afghan state through corruption. NATO is currently discussing what ISAF could contribute to the counter-narcotics fight, according to General McKiernan, who said the Alliance is considering whether and how to broaden the existing authorities that allowed ISAF to support the government of

Afghanistan's efforts by providing logistics, *in extremis* support, and medical evacuation. NATO forces will also likely be authorized to take on direct action against insurgent-linked narcotics targets.

NATO has not reached a consensus on this question, with some nations concerned that any ISAF engagement in the counter-narcotics fight will be doomed to failure given current force levels and unsustainable in the long run. Many also argue that targeting the narcotics trade will likely take away the only source of income available to many Afghans and turn additional segments of the population against international forces.

NATO will also have to make some concrete decisions on the manner in which it conducts nonoperational tasks in Afghanistan. Early on, ISAF established Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) throughout the country to carry out stabilization and reconstruction activities. PRTs were envisioned as innovative tools that combined traditional patrolling, monitoring, and stabilization efforts with security provision for the reconstruction efforts by the international community.

However, continued insecurity has largely prevented other organizations (e.g., NGOs, the UN) from engaging in development activities, and the PRTs have increasingly filled the gap with direct assistance projects in their areas of operations. Each PRT reports to its own national authorities, often leading to coordination problems and inefficient development assistance. In addition, President Karzai has charged that the direct assistance provided by PRTs has undermined local authorities who should be delivering assistance to their own people and robbed the central government of legitimacy, amounting to what he called the establishment of a "parallel government."²⁷

A COURSE CORRECTION? OBAMA, NATO, AND AFGHANISTAN

Leadership from the Obama administration is required within NATO to ensure the Alliance does not fail in Afghanistan. Such failure could abandon the country to the Taliban, narco-trafficking, and a return to its former state as a breeding ground for terrorism, with all of the attendant risks to the Afghan people and to those closer to home. It is also in the United States' interest to ensure NATO's success in Afghanistan in order to preserve NATO's role as an exporter of security going forward.

The new administration would do well to first take account of the fact that an agreed plan is already in place, and that maintaining some continuity with that plan could be beneficial. At NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008, ISAF troop-contributing nations agreed on a Comprehensive

Political-Military Strategic Plan for Afghanistan and a public declaration outlining ISAF's strategic vision. This declaration sets out four principles: a firm and shared long-term commitment; support for enhanced Afghan leadership and responsibility; a comprehensive approach by the international community, bringing together civilian and military efforts; and increased cooperation and engagement with Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan. The documents also set out 64 tasks to be carried out over the next three to five years, as well as benchmarks against which to measure progress. Obama's team should first rely on this plan and the benchmarks to get a handle on how NATO's assistance is helping Afghanistan's progress.

But it will also be necessary to put resources behind the new administration's conviction that business as usual will not win the war. It has been widely reported that Washington will be making significant additional troop deployments to Afghanistan and requesting matching contributions from its NATO Allies. Responding positively to the commanders' requests for additional forces, especially during the critical period of the Afghan presidential elections in 2009, makes a good deal of sense and would demonstrate renewed U.S. engagement, signalling that the new administration truly considers success in Afghanistan crucial to American and global security.

While the idea of pushing allies to remove restrictive caveats from their deployed units is attractive, NATO has made only marginal progress on this issue in the last several years, in spite of its intense focus. As it appears that some allies simply are not willing to change their policies in this respect, more creative solutions may be necessary, such as pushing for other types of contributions rather than additional combat troops in the south of Afghanistan.

The U.S. wish list for NATO regarding Afghanistan should also include the greatest possible latitude for ISAF and any enhanced U.S. elements in Afghanistan in the fight against the narcotics trade; moving beyond ideological debates on the training of Afghan security forces (and overcoming the distaste some nations feel for direct training of the Afghan police by military personnel); and additional NATO oversight on PRTs that would ensure the building up of the local government rather than its marginalization.

Other elements of Obama's expressed foreign policy inclinations, including his description of the need for a regional approach, may prove especially helpful in Afghanistan. Opening a broader dialogue with Iran, for example, holds the possibility of increased cooperation on the Afghan drug problem; Tehran itself is facing an unprecedented and crippling heroin problem that also originates in Afghanistan. In addition, President

Obama has rightly emphasized the central role of Pakistan in Afghanistan's future. U.S. leadership on both fronts would assist NATO's efforts.

CONCLUSION: A MOMENT FOR U.S. LEADERSHIP

Beyond the day-to-day work of diplomacy, President Obama's team will benefit from several rare opportunities to demonstrate crucial leadership at NATO early in his administration. These opportunities should be used to advance the agenda detailed above.

NATO's 60th Anniversary Summit in April 2009, represents one such opportunity. While much of the planning for the event has been completed by the Bush administration, the assembled heads of state will adopt a "Declaration on Alliance Security," which itself will set the stage for the drafting of a new Strategic Concept for the Alliance, an effort in which the new administration is expected to be fully engaged.

The elaboration of a new Strategic Concept, to be adopted in 2010, is particularly important. The document will set the overall direction of the Alliance. Last updated in 1999, the document will have to take into account: the changes in the strategic landscape since the attacks of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist activities around the world; the current state of relations with Russia and aspirations for what it might become; future guidance on enlargement; and new areas of focus for the Alliance, such as cyber-defense and energy security. In short, it represents a perfect opportunity for the Obama team to demonstrate what kind of NATO it wants to see going forward, and to lobby allies for the commitment and resources to make that vision a reality. On the other hand, Obama's campaign promises to listen more closely to allies will also certainly be put to the test.

The 60th anniversary is also likely to feature an announcement by France that it is rejoining NATO's integrated military structure, which should be accompanied by a stronger EU defense identity. The Obama administration could seize the political implications of the move to fully endorse the development of the EU as a security actor while ensuring complementarities between the two organizations. Given the security challenges facing the largely overlapping memberships of the EU and NATO, additional capabilities and wherewithal to deal with security problems should be welcomed, as should any opportunity to eliminate some of the wasteful and counterproductive frictions between the organizations.

President Obama himself may have an ace in the hole: it is a rare thing for a U.S. President to have anything resembling "political capital" with European publics. Yet the "soft power" that comes with Barack

Obama's personal popularity in Europe could be put to good use, especially in NATO's efforts in Afghanistan.²⁸ President Obama, should he continue to be seen as a transcendent figure by Europeans, could make it a priority to communicate directly to the European public the importance of doing what is necessary to win the war in Afghanistan and effectively break the linkage they make between Afghanistan and Iraq as "Bush's wars." Were he able to persuade even some segments of European publics of the necessity of NATO's efforts, he might create enough breathing room for European governments and parliaments to provide the resources necessary to making more rapid progress in Afghanistan.

Seldom has the North Atlantic Treaty Organization found itself so challenged as it is today. The war in Afghanistan will shape the way NATO fights—or chooses not to fight—future conflicts, while the war in Georgia has influenced the way NATO perceives its political future.

Yet even as the Alliance confronts the challenges posed by these two wars, NATO continues to demonstrate both its utility and its continued appeal to nonmembers. In 2008, NATO was engaged in no fewer than six major operations involving more than 65,000 personnel. From ISAF in Afghanistan to peacekeeping in Kosovo to training officers in Iraq to deterring piracy off the coast of Somalia, NATO continues to be engaged in a greater number and wider range of operations around the world in response to the security needs of its members. Two new members are poised to join NATO in 2009—Albania and Croatia—and the list of countries seeking membership or closer cooperation on various levels ranges from Georgia and Ukraine to Australia and Japan.

The new U.S. administration has a rare set of tools and opportunities at its disposal to effectively lead the Alliance forward and ensure its success and continued relevance. The Obama team, should it successfully navigate these challenges and opportunities, could ensure that the pundits who once again are proclaiming the imminent death of the Alliance will be proved wrong and that NATO will continue to serve a crucial role in the interests of its member states, partners, and the international community at large in the decades to come. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Nick Witney, "The Death of NATO," *Europe's World*, Autumn 2008, and "The Georgia Crisis: A Blow to NATO," Tony Karon, *Time*, August 15, 2008.
- 2 An excellent overview of the institutional relations between Russia and NATO can be found in Julianne Smith's "The NATO-Russia Relationship: Defining Moment or Deja-Vu?" CSIS/IFRI, November 14, 2008

- 3 The Bucharest Summit Declaration is available at <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html> (accessed December 29, 2008). Moscow took this language as particularly offensive, and experts suggest that Russia “stepped up its manipulation of the [frozen] conflicts after Bucharest, bringing war with Georgia closer” and that it began its detailed planning and preparation for the Georgian conflict just after the Summit. “Russia vs. Georgia: The Fallout,” International Crisis Group: Europe Report No. 195, August 22, 2008.
- 4 Ronald D. Asmus, “Europe’s Eastern Promise,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.
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- 9 Tony Karon, “Ukraine Democracy Could Cool its Bid for NATO Membership,” *Time*, October 9, 2008.
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