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Risking NATO

Testing the Limits of the
Alliance in Afghanistan

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Summary

Sixty years after its inception, NATO finds itself at what could be a pivotal and defining moment. NATO's success in Afghanistan—or lack thereof—will have significant implications for the future of the alliance. A successful mission in Afghanistan could promote the vision of NATO as a global security alliance capable of undertaking a wide scope of operations, ranging from diplomatic engagement to peace-keeping operations and even to combat operations beyond the bounds of the treaty area. Such versatility would confirm NATO's role as the most important security alliance in existence. Alternatively, failure in Afghanistan, or even an indeterminate outcome, would portend an uncertain future for NATO. Were NATO to emerge less than victorious, it would remain to be seen what lessons the alliance would retain other than determining never to embark on a mission like this again. Indeed, it is entirely possible that NATO would conclude that nation-building in Afghanistan was not that important after all and not worth the risk, on the assumption that the real goal was to preclude al Qaeda from reestablishing a sanctuary there. While this may spare NATO the painful experience of learning hard lessons, it would not spare the pain felt for those lives lost.

The Americanization of the effort, a result of the March and December 2009 decisions by the U.S. administration to significantly increase U.S. troops and equipment, provided renewed momentum to the mission, in addition to much-needed resources. Nevertheless, while the Americanization may be good for Afghanistan, it may prove to be bad for NATO as an alliance. Indeed, absent a decision to increase

their own contributions in kind, alliance partners instead find themselves junior partners. In an alliance that finds achieving consensus is central, having one partner clearly overshadow all others highlights the real limits of the transatlantic alliance.

The purpose of this document is to evaluate NATO's role as an alliance given NATO's past, but with a focus on NATO's present and an eye toward the future. In particular, we examine the risks, commitments, and obligations entailed in NATO's operations in Afghanistan and the effects this mission has on the alliance's internal dynamics. We draw on a wide range of sources to examine how NATO's role has been redefined over time. In doing so, we make certain observations:

- NATO assumed control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission without a firm understanding of the demands, level of commitment, or level of resources such a mission would entail. In short, NATO had no strategy. (See pp. 16–24.)
- Despite rebalancing efforts, not all alliance members are sharing this mission's burdens—troop levels, funding, and equipment—equally. A few members are bearing the brunt of commitments for operations in Afghanistan. (See pp. 42–48.)
- Operations in Afghanistan have forced the alliance to confront something it has largely avoided in previous operations: the risk of casualties. On this all-important issue, the uneven distribution of the burdens and risks among ISAF members is having a corrosive effect on the cohesion of the alliance. (See pp. 48–56.)
- Given the risks and the nature of the threat in Afghanistan, managing the expectations of NATO members and their respective publics will require greater effort. Addressing the misalignment of expectations both within governments (between military and civilian elements) and between governments and their electorates would help foster greater cohesion between NATO forces deployed abroad and their counterparts at home and would aid the development of a more holistic long-term strategy for Afghanistan. (See pp. 60–67.)
- NATO members increasingly acknowledge that a successful long-term strategy in Afghanistan, especially given recent levels of vio-

lence and instability, must include a sustained commitment to training, equipping, advising, and assisting the Afghan National Security Forces; bolstering security in regions under threat from the Taliban or other criminal elements; strengthening governance at the local and national levels; and assisting development and reconstruction efforts. The membership has, however, not yet provided adequate resources for such a strategy. (See pp. 27–37.)

- Such a long-term strategy should also be coherent, comprehensive, and coordinated with other key powers and organizations, including the Afghan government, the United Nations, and the European Union. Most important, these entities need to align their strategies with the others and work toward compatible and complimentary time lines. As it stands, the American, European, and Afghan partners are all working under very different time lines—and in some instances, different goals. (See pp. 27–39 and 60–67.)
- Additionally, NATO’s role in Afghanistan has opened opportunities for constructive outreach to regional powers that have a vested interest in, and influence on, the outcome of operations in Afghanistan. For example, NATO, as a forum, could be a valuable tool for a coordinated effort to reach out politically to garner more-effective support from Pakistan. (See pp. 64–65.)
- Finally, the success and survival of the alliance beyond Afghanistan will require the alliance to redefine the roles of NATO members and nonmembers, as well as its relationships with the United Nations and the European Union. (See pp. 56–60.)

The list of issues NATO faces is long and daunting and extends beyond the borders of the member countries. Yet, if the goal is indeed to look toward the future, these are issues the alliance must confront; failure to do so would risk the long-term success and sustainability of the alliance.