

NATO's Milestone Lisbon Summit

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The upcoming NATO summit in Lisbon this weekend promises to be significant both for an American-backed plan for withdrawing allied troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and for the presence of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev's willingness to join the summit is an important moment, says Robert E. Hunter, U.S. ambassador to NATO from 1993 to 1998, signaling that Russia is interested in playing "a positive role in the future of European security" and might even join the new missile defense plan that's on the table.

Hunter also notes that the announcement of a new timeline for withdrawing forces from Afghanistan will be a boon to many European leaders, who are facing voters opposed to their country's continued presence there. He adds that uncoordinated defense budget cuts by France, Germany, and England are cutting into NATO capacity and need to be addressed.

Would you say the highlights of the Lisbon summit will be Medvedev's presence and the announcement of a new Afghan troop withdrawal plan?

One of the most important things that will happen, it appears, is for NATO to start putting into place the last piece of the great jigsaw puzzle created by [former] president George H.W. Bush in 1989, when he talked about how to create a Europe whole, free, and at peace. The one piece that had been missing was an effective relationship between NATO and Russia, and for Russia to play a positive role in the future of European security. The fact that Medvedev is coming is indicative of that. How much of that is internal politics, Medvedev versus Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, one can't tell, but it does look as though the Russians have made a calculation that it is worth it to Russia to be more engaged with NATO and more of a participant in the NATO efforts to redefine European security.

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Now, emblematic of that will be the extent to which the Russians are prepared to sign on to the new U.S.-NATO methodology of doing ballistic missile defense, designed, of course, primarily against the possibility of Iranian missiles, but where Russia would have its own security enhanced against threats from the south and the east. In the past, the Russian have played a game saying that U.S. efforts to put some components of a missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic were directed against Russia. That was always a propaganda red herring, but it does look that the Russians will take a positive attitude in Lisbon and might even sign onto what is being proposed in regard to the U.S.-led NATO missile defense system.

Is this missile defense system very different from the one former president George W. Bush's administration had been discussing?

The earlier one clearly was perceived as designed to protect the United States as part of a three-part missile defense against either North Korea or against Iran. The newer plan would also protect all of Europe. And it would protect parts of Russia, as well.

There's been considerable discussion about the so-called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces in Afghanistan. When President Obama announced American policy in Afghanistan last December, he said that the United States would start a drawdown in July 2011. The NATO summit is due to adopt a plan for the ISAF to stay in Afghanistan through 2014. This is obviously a modification of the U.S. approach, right?

Announcing a timeline, even though it is some years in the future, will help the European leaders, almost all of whom are under political pressure to explain how long their countries will be expected to have forces engaged in Afghanistan. Saying that NATO military operations will end in 2014, except for training, etc., of course begs the question of what will happen in the near future, about what allies will be asked to do militarily between now and then, and it also does not preempt the internal review in the United States that President Obama says he will conduct next month. But the 2014 timeline will help keep Afghanistan from "hijacking" this summit. Nevertheless, NATO countries will still have to decide what they would really be willing to do, militarily, in the era "after Afghanistan." No real decisions can be made now, even though NATO's new Strategic Concept, due to be made public, will make some generalized statements about its future role.

Is there anything else happening that could pose a political or military problem at Lisbon?

Yes, the cuts that NATO countries have been making in their defense budgets--in particular the big three Europeans: the Germans, the French, and the British. It seems that these cuts were done without coordination, and even though each of them has tried to put the best possible face on it, the fact is that this reduces NATO capabilities. The response at the summit will be to adopt a Critical Capabilities Initiative. What I would like to see is a process where all the allies, including the United States, work together to limit the extent to which budget cuts also cut into NATO capabilities. The Europeans have about two million men and women under arms but can only deploy and sustain about sixty thousand-plus. The alliance needs to get the first number down in order to get the second number up. It also needs to get serious about the so-called Comprehensive Approach, the integration of non-military efforts like governance, reconstruction, and development, as in Afghanistan. This means breaking down the remaining barriers between NATO and the EU, which I don't expect to happen at Lisbon.

It's ironic, isn't it, to have Russia sitting in on the NATO meeting, when NATO was set up in 1948 and 1949 as a counter to Soviet expansionism?

NATO has been fundamentally transformed beginning in the 1990s with the great vision of President George H.W. Bush, to create a Europe whole and free. This includes everybody who is prepared to play in a certain framework, and in which everybody gains security and nobody loses any. So NATO is a very different animal already from what it was in the Cold War. About the only thing that's the same is the NATO headquarters building in Brussels, and they're building a

new one. The orientation of NATO has been away from confrontation to become more inclusionary and deal with the reality of the future. That's a very different alliance.

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The debate at NATO for the longer term will focus on balancing security in Europe. It's not just: How does one manage the future of Russia? A smaller piece is: What about the Balkans--Moldova, Belarus? Other pieces that might be more important are energy and cybersecurity and challenges from outside in terms of ballistic missiles. That's the European piece, some of which NATO does and some of which it doesn't do. Another question is to what extent will allies be willing, in a NATO framework or even outside a NATO framework, to help the United States do its primary business, which is no longer in Europe, but in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. That is why the United States is looking to NATO more in terms of who will be engaged with us in Afghanistan and who will be more engaged with us if there are other situations outside of Europe.

President Obama has just returned from a ten-day trip to Asia that included G20 and APEC meetings. Will his standing at the NATO meeting be affected by his "shellacking" in the midterm elections?

There is an interesting juxtaposition here between going to Asia, which was mostly about economics, and going to Europe, which is mostly about what you might call classical security issues, where the economic dimension won't be talked about at all at the NATO meeting. To the extent that it is talked about it will be in the two-hour summit the president will have with the EU leadership, plus all the other international economic and financial meetings to take place. Also, there's kind of a contrast--I hate to say it--between the new economics and the old security, the tension between America, as perceived in Europe, being engaged in Asia as opposed to continuing its strategic and security level of engagement with the Europeans. They are obsessively worried about a diversion of U.S. attention elsewhere.

Now, it is true that our recent elections have had an impact in Europe on their perceptions of the potential effectiveness of our president. But he is still immensely popular in Europe and deservedly so. Not just the things that he says about working with others, the things he's done in openings to the Muslim world, but also the transformative effects in American society, which we tend to play down because we tend to look at today's news and forget about how we got here.