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Mending NATO

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How to save the alliance

WASHINGTON

Disagreements over the Iraq war and a growing gap in military capabilities are threatening the future of NATO. Will the alliance, which shielded two generations from the armed might of the Soviet Union, be able to protect the next generation from new threats that face all trans-Atlantic partners?

National leaders need to set aside personal pique and take concrete steps to put NATO back on the right track, because the cost of letting the alliance wither is too high: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is the only institution capable of dealing effectively with what may be a decades-long struggle against terrorism.

To realize how necessary NATO is, consider the reasons new members are joining the alliance. Europe is not yet whole and free, and only NATO can complete that task. Defending trans-Atlantic homelands against terrorism and missile attacks is best accomplished with the aid of allies. The various coalitions that have been assembled to fight terrorism are all based to some degree on the NATO alliance.

NATO has faced deep divisions before — over Suez in 1956, over the nature of deterrence in the mid-1960s and over intermediate-range nuclear missile deployments in the early 1980s. But the split is deeper this time because the nature of the new enemy is less clear. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic are considering alternatives to NATO. Some NATO members are working openly to oppose the national security policies of others.

So how can national leaders save NATO? Four measures would help.

First, NATO can help with reconstruction in Iraq, just as it is doing in Afghanistan. Several NATO nations pledged forces for this purpose recently at a conference in London, but Germany and France were excluded. Poland has agreed to lead in one of five "sectors" in Iraq, but it is seeking help from other Europeans. Germany has indicated that it would contribute if a UN Security Council resolution authorized the reconstruction. If Germany contributes, France might reconsider and contribute as well. With adequate flexibility on both sides, NATO might help heal its own wounds by healing those of Iraq.

Second, NATO must fulfill the promise of the summit meeting in Prague in November and begin to close the trans-Atlantic military capabilities gap. At that meeting, heads of state agreed to create a NATO response force and committed to develop modern military capabilities. Both pledges are designed to begin the process of transforming European militaries for 21st-century missions.

The recent proposal by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg to create a competing European force could distract allies from committing assets for the NATO response force. NATO foreign and defense ministers need to reconfirm their commitment to the Prague goals during their meetings next month, and European militaries need to contribute highly ready forces to make the NATO response force a reality.

Third, some changes are needed in the way NATO makes decisions. The current system is based on the predictable risks of the Cold War and the unity of purpose that accompanied it. Future threats will be less predictable and may require rapid responses in distant places.

Discord within the alliance means this is a difficult time to adjust the decision-making process, but some progress in this area could reassure critics that NATO has a role in a fast-paced global environment. A starting place would be giving NATO commanders broader contingency-planning authority. A bolder concept would be to pre-authorize subgroups within NATO to act on behalf of the alliance with regard to potential contingencies.

Finally, NATO should consider preparing a broad strategic review along the lines of the Harmel Report, which reunited a tattered NATO in 1967. The NATO secretary-general, Lord Robertson, is well suited to oversee such a healing effort. Two possible tracks for such a review might be fielding expeditionary military capabilities and forging greater consensus on how to deal with turmoil in areas of instability.

These four steps are politically feasible once leaders recognize the stakes. The new generation faces a dangerous future and the dangers would be magnified without NATO. Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic cannot allow the weakening of the one international institution that has proven itself capable of dealing with such dangers.

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