

NATO Ministerial Meetings in Brussels: Looking Ahead to the Istanbul Summit in 2004

A Review of the NATO Defense Ministers' Meeting (December 1–2) and a Preview of the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting (December 4–5)

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Formal meetings of NATO foreign and defense ministers are held twice a year to review Alliance activities and current developments, and to make appropriate decisions. For an analysis of the June Ministerial Meetings, see: <http://www.basicint.org/europe/NATO/main.htm>.

On December 1 and 2, NATO defense ministers met to review, among other issues, the fight against terrorism and the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. A key issue for discussion was the capability of NATO forces to meet today's security threats, particularly the usability and deployability of forces, the implementation of the NATO Response Force and the new command structure.

One of the few tangible outcomes of the meeting was the launch of the Alliance's new multinational Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defense Battalion in the Czech Republic. Ministers also examined the operational requirements of a possible expansion of the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan beyond Kabul.

NATO foreign ministers will meet on December 4 and 5 to examine the political side of these issues. In particular, they will also look at NATO's missions in Afghanistan and the Balkans and give NATO precise tasks for the preparation of the Istanbul Summit in June 2004 in many key Alliance policy areas.

This briefing reviews several of the key outcomes of the Defense Ministers' Meeting (December 1-2) and previews some of the likely discussions at the Foreign Ministers' Meeting (December 4-5). It also raises a number of issues that will not appear in the final ministerial communiqués but are nonetheless crucial to understanding current developments within the Alliance.

Front and center on NATO's agenda ...

The 'War on Terrorism'

The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously on October 13 to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond its concentration in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, following NATO's confirmation of its support for the initiative. However, NATO members have so far failed overall to provide the additional resources necessary to expand the ISAF beyond the capital. After poking and prodding from Secretary-General Robertson, ministers announced that they would supply an additional 14 helicopters to the current three for ISAF use. Among the other contributions slated for Afghanistan are Norway's plans to send a mechanized company to provide security for voter registration in preparation for the 2004 elections. The Czech Republic is now committing 150 troops and Iceland will send 25 personnel to aid security at Kabul airport.[1] The Final Communiqué from the Defense Ministers' Meeting stressed that the expansion of ISAF would be "progressive" and that NATO could eventually take charge of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). Those with an interest in transforming NATO to successfully manage out-of-area tasks will be watching NATO's progress in Afghanistan closely and will take stock in Istanbul in June.

In what has become a showcase plan for the Alliance's response to the threat from terrorism, NATO declared as operational its new multinational Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Defense Battalion. Based in the Czech Republic, the new unit is designed to respond to and defend against the use of 'weapons of mass destruction' both inside and beyond NATO's area of responsibility. According to a NATO press release, the core of this unit consists of more than 160 NBC specialists from the 31st CBRN Defense in Liberec. Presently, 13 nations are participating in the formation of the battalion: Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. The battalion will become fully operational by July 2004.

NATO drawing down peacekeeping in Southeastern Europe and the EU moving in

NATO is continuing its gradual handover of peace operations in the Balkans to the EU. At the ministerial meeting, the defense ministers approved overall recommendations for troop levels in the Balkans for the next six months. At present, NATO is further reducing its peacekeeping presence in Bosnia. SFOR will draw down from 12,000 to 7,000 troops[2] and the EU is likely

to take over the mission at the end of 2004. The EU has already taken over NATO's former peacekeeping role in the F.Y.R. of Macedonia. However, NATO ministers decided to maintain their current 17,500 strong troop level in Kosovo because of the continued tense security situation.

NATO Response Force

The NRF was activated on October 15 and will become fully operational by October 2006. NATO leaders still plan on using the NRF for a full range of missions from intense combat to peacekeeping. Defense ministers, including the instigator of the NRF himself, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, played up its development as a reflection of the Alliance's newfound ability to transform itself. The foreign ministers will need to deal with the tougher political decisions of when and where to use the NRF. Although the foreign ministers will probably not grapple with these decisions explicitly in the upcoming communiqués, it will become a dicey endeavor if the transatlantic debates over Iraq provide any indication of the challenges ahead.

Also on the agenda, but with more behind-the-scenes tensions...

EU defense force planning and impact on NATO

During the informal NATO defense ministers' meeting in Colorado back in October, US Ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns, called EU defense plans "one of the greatest dangers to the transatlantic relationship."^[3] And Tony Blair became the subject of controversy while he was trying to serve as a mediator between the United States, which has opposed an EU command and control center that would be independent of NATO, and Germany and France, which have pushed for the creation of just such a center. At one point, US officials became concerned that Blair was siding with the Franco-German initiative. Blair reportedly agreed to a statement by Germany that the EU should be able to "plan and conduct operations without recourse to NATO capabilities."^[4] This problem may have been in part a result of the departure of Blair's pro-NATO foreign policy advisor, Sir David Manning. Manning was replaced by Sir Nigel Sheinwald, who is considered more pro-European. Despite these problems, the EU and NATO completed their first-ever joint crisis management exercise on November 25.

The US Administration wants the EU and NATO to agree on a "joint strategic vision," which could be announced at the June NATO Summit in Istanbul.^[5] If this specific initiative is discussed during the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, it will be within the context of NATO supporters worrying about the political threat from, and/or a redundancy of capabilities within, a more independent and militarily stronger EU.

A new Secretary General: Robertson's term ending and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer of The Netherlands taking the helm

Another potential European-US faultline concerns the appointment of a new Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, who replaces Lord Robertson on January 1, 2004. During his current tenure as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE (Minister of Foreign Affairs for The Netherlands), Jaap de Hoop Scheffer argued that the "rule of law and good governance can reinforce each other as parts of a more comprehensive security strategy. The International Criminal Court is another example of how to ensure that international norms are upheld in cases when national governments fail to do so."^[6] However, De Hoop Scheffer is generally regarded as a traditional Atlanticist and tends to display more pro-US leanings than many other European politicians. Therefore, given the overriding desire for Alliance unity, it seems unlikely that the new Secretary-General will promote any multilateral initiatives that cut across core US foreign policy objectives.

Discussion about a future NATO peacekeeping role in Iraq

The section of the defense ministers' communiqué on Iraq is very low key, and well down the list below Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. Any future discussions of this issue will focus on action

beyond the Alliance's support for Polish participation in current operations. Both the United States and the Secretary-General have reiterated the possibility of NATO's taking on a greater role in Iraq. Yet because of the underlying tension over the transition of authority in Iraq and the fact that the United States has limited the role of the United Nations, major European allies will be reluctant to dive in to such a venture on the multinational scale required by the present security situation.[7]

In addition to the bitter aftertaste from the entire Iraq imbroglio, the US Administration's initial ignoring of some Iraqi concerns about a possible Turkish peacekeeping presence has placed this NATO ally in an embarrassing situation. Would Turkey need to sit out of a full-fledged NATO peacekeeping mission in Iraq? Would the placing of Turkish troops work as part of a wider NATO deployment in politically acceptable regions of Iraq? Depending on how the situation in Iraq unfolds, NATO may need to facilitate a way forward for Turkey and the United States.[8]

The Bush Administration's approach to security policy

Commenting on the United States' national security strategy around the time of the informal defense ministers' meeting in October, a French Embassy spokeswoman told the Denver Post that pre-emptive war "creates a bad example for other countries." She said that the pre-emption doctrine could encourage "a country like India" to attack Pakistan.[9] Taking into account the United States' dominance of NATO, one must ask how allies will cope with the Bush Administration's foreign policy. For example, will the NRF become a tool for US pre-emption around the world? Pre-emptive (or preventive) war goes to the heart of the political decisions the foreign ministers will grudgingly face again in the future.

Another issue causing worry among NATO allies is the United States' reluctance to share intelligence on the battlefield. In November, the Daily Telegraph in London highlighted the frustrations of British, Australian (non-NATO), and Canadian allies trying to help the United States in Iraq and elsewhere. A US officer explained the situation: "They [allies] gave us stuff and we labeled it secret and then they weren't allowed to see it." [10] Officials at the Pentagon, including Secretary Rumsfeld, want the policy changed and claim that the problem is not under Defense Department authority.[11] Until the policy is changed, US officials at these NATO meetings will surely hear complaints.

NATO defense budgets and capabilities

Discussion has gone on for some time about burden sharing in the Alliance. Issues addressed include the fact that the United States leads Europe by far in defense spending and whether Europe should spend more on defense and spend that money more wisely. In a related vein, the Alliance is continuing status checks on the progress of the most recent NATO invitees (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria). As expected at the Defense Ministers' Meeting, the Secretary-General said progress has been made on improving alliance capabilities, but that much more needs to be done.

During all of the meetings, Allies are likely to continue complaining about Washington's unwillingness to share technology when, at the same time, US officials complain about Europe not modernizing its forces to fight on a par with the United States. The capabilities debate may include on-the-side discussions about defense export control "streamlining" and the proposed US waiver of arms trade regulations for Britain. Diminishing the hopes of some British officials, Congress did not approve the export control waiver before Bush's visit to Britain. US efforts within NATO to encourage European countries to upgrade their defense articles have been viewed as a tactic to get Europe to make big purchases from US defense contractors. Also, EU defense ministers recently decided to create a European Armaments Agency to harmonize the acquisition of defense equipment and to counter the powerful US defense industry.

However, a number of fundamental questions appear to remain outside of the main ministerial debates:

- Why, for example, should Europeans spend more on enforcing the new American world order?

- Is capabilities-led defense spending the right way forward?
- Would it be better to base defense spending on a robust analysis of the threat and in tackling the causes of the threat?
- What are the negative impacts of “arms racing” between and within allies?

There also needs to be a greater debate around US defense spending, both in terms of volume and priorities. According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, US military units in Iraq have experienced shortages of critical equipment, such as body armor and more heavily armored personnel carriers, at a time when the Pentagon’s inflated budget continues to be dominated by “big-ticket, Cold War-era weapons,” such as:

- The F/A-22 fighter aircraft (which carries a total program cost of \$70 billion);
- The “Virginia” attack submarine (\$73 billion); and
- The Trident II D-5 nuclear-tipped missile (\$38 billion).[12]

The Alliance will need to deal with these questions and the aforementioned tensions if it is to successfully make the transition from a Cold War-era defensive alliance to one that proves useful and efficient in dealing with present-day security challenges. These issues will dominate NATO’s meetings in the near future, both “front-and-center” and behind-the-scenes.

Footnotes

[1]Dempsey, Judy, “NATO to Reinforce ISAF,” Financial Times, December 2, 2003.

[2] “NATO to Slash Bosnia Force, Open Way for EU Mission,” Reuters, November 24, 2003.

[3]Dempsey, Judy, “NATO Urged to Challenge European Defense Plan,” Financial Times, October 17, 2003.

[4]Spiegel, Peter and Blitz, James, “US Dismay Over Blair’s Stance on EU Defense,” Financial Times, October 15, 2003.

[5]Evans, Michael “US Offers Vision for NATO,” London Times, October 22, 2003.

[6]De Hoop Scheffer, Jaap, Address before the 58th Session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 26, 2003.

[7]According to Secretary Rumsfeld, 18 of 26 current and invited NATO member countries have troops in Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition. Associated Press, “NATO Allies in Iraq to Stay, Rumsfeld Says,” Baltimore Sun, December 3, 2003.

[8]As a face-saving plan for Turkey and the United States, some have recommended that Turkey switch its proposal to provide a peacekeeping force in Iraq to Afghanistan instead. See Galic, Mirna and Pan, Michael, “Look to Turkey for Afghanistan Help,” column on the Web site of the Center for American Progress, December 1, 2003.

[9]Finley, Bruce, “NATO Meeting Highlights Tough Transition,” Denver Post, October 5, 2003.

[10]Smith, Michael, “US Keeps Intelligence Secret from British,” The Telegraph, November 20, 2003.

[11]Smith, M.

[12]Hellman, Christopher, “Spending on the Wrong Weapons - What the Pentagon Should be Buying for Iraq and Afghanistan,” Project on Military Spending Oversight, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, December 1, 2003.