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NATO confronts the bear and mosquitoes

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The Russian-Georgian crisis, the latest tug-of-war for regional dominance, and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan have once again underscored NATO's old-new challenge in the 21st century. After all, NATO was initially created to confront the "Russian Bear" as a strategic alliance that guaranteed its members military support in the case of aggression by a third country.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the traditional NATO mission is now more relevant than ever. The Russian armed attack against Georgia, a candidate for joining the 26-nation Atlantic alliance, also opened a serious rift between the Alliance and Moscow, threatening security concerns in Europe and beyond.

Indeed, the NATO ambassadors recently met in an extraordinary gathering of the NATO Atlantic Council (NATO's top decisionmaking body) to deplore Russia's "excessive, disproportionate use of force" and to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, "a respected partner and friend." Moreover, NATO foreign ministers are due to meet in Brussels to discuss the implications of Russia's policies and actions to consider a range of options to respond to the perceived "aggression."

Though it is premature to determine what specific measures the Alliance will undertake, such as suspending or abolishing the NATO council devoted to relations with Russia, it is crystal-clear that Moscow would not have dared to initiate military action had Georgia already been a member of NATO like the other former Soviet Republics in the Baltic States.

The other major challenge to NATO is its evolving role in combating terrorism, both nonstate and state-sponsored. The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks unmistakably provided a "wake-up" call to NATO to redefine its post-Cold War mission.

More specifically, within hours of the Sept. 11 attacks, Article 5, the mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, was invoked for the first time in the Alliance's history. This was not only a symbolic confirmation of NATO's solidarity with the United States but a signal that the alliance was prepared to adapt to the emerging international terrorist network challenges, conventional and unconventional.

Thus, in the aftermath of Sept. 11, the character of NATO's missions was fundamentally changed. As a globally operating security provider, it swiftly responded to the American request for assistance and contributed AWACS aircraft to control the U.S. airspace. Subsequently it provided air surveillance for high-profile events like the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup. The Navy launched Operation Active Endeavor to patrol the Mediterranean Sea and disrupt maritime logistics of terrorist organizations in the region. No longer confined to traditional spheres of influence, NATO also increased cooperation with non-member states like Russia, Ukraine and the Maghreb countries to counter transnational terrorism.

During the November 2002 Prague Summit, NATO officially declared its newly adopted role in actively combating terrorism and protecting both armed forces and the civil population of member states against terrorist attacks. This broad strategic readjustment included a new military concept for defense against terrorism involving both offensive and defensive capabilities. The most recent NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 added to Alliance counterterrorism tasks such as cyber defense measures, infrastructure protection, and comprehensive weapons of mass destruction counterproliferation policy.

To be sure, the United Nations provided the legal framework for NATO operations that are not considered as self-defense, according to Article 51 of the U.N. Charter or Article 5 of the Transatlantic Treaty. Moreover, NATO is actively involved in the work of the U.N. Counter Terrorism Committee, its secretary-general reports regularly to the United Nations secretary-general on NATO-led counterterrorism operations, and joint staff level meetings have become more frequent.

NATO also partners with the European Union (e.g. military cooperation known as "Berlin Plus," that enables the EU to conduct military operations on the European security and defense policy, thereby having access to NATO assets) and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (e.g. complementing NATO as a "norm-setting" institution that focuses on a variety of security-building measures such as promoting human rights).

Currently, NATO's most important and extensive contribution to the global War on Terror is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. The first ISAF troops were deployed in January 2002, four months after the U.S.-led invasion ousted the Taliban and al Qaeda. With the launch of the ISAF mission, NATO ultimately left its originally designated area of operation and accepted the role as an international security provider against the background of a new and globalized security environment. The Sept. 11 attacks demonstrated that a remote state like Afghanistan can pose a direct threat when it serves as a safe haven for terrorists willing to carry out a global jihad against the western world and its allies.

Regarding the campaign in Afghanistan, the alliance since 2003 contributed some 43,000 troops. ISAF patrols, reconstruction efforts and police training have been crucial in stabilizing most parts of the country and preventing the Taliban and terrorist groups from gaining control.

Regrettably, in the last three years, and particularly this summer, the security situation has deteriorated significantly, proving that "soft" peacekeeping efforts alone are insufficient to restore peace, law, and order at the Hindu Kush. Currently, NATO confronts a full-fledged insurgency that has emerged in the south and east of the country. In this region, the original stabilization mission has evolved in a serious insurgency war with an uncertain outcome.

Of particular concern is the fact that most of NATO members show reluctance to support their British, Canadian, Dutch and American allies in riskier operations against insurgents and terrorists. But without the combined effort of all allies, the world's most powerful military alliance is likely to fail on this pivotal front of the War on Terror.

The situation that unfolds here will not only shape the regional security for the coming years significantly, but will also determine the future of NATO itself and its credibility as a capable military alliance and security provider. NATO must act decisively to fill the security vacuum that has left the world susceptible to the increasingly apparent terrorist threat, and NATO must assert its relevance in the post-Sept. 11 world.

In sum, confronting threatening historical and contemporary powers as well as terrorist mosquitoes in an ever-expanding global swamp is an unprecedented challenge to NATO. After all, it would be wise to recall a Russian popular warning that even if "the bear is gone, he left the place for the wolf."

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