



## Insight

# Hard Truths About NATO

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Senior foreign and defense policy officials from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will descend on Chicago in the coming days for the alliance's annual summit. The summit represents the latest opportunity to reexamine NATO's capabilities, evaluate its performance, and plan for the alliance's future. In Chicago, President Obama should refrain from too much self-congratulation and instead focus on encouraging European leaders to boost their commitments in tangible ways.

We are likely to hear many promises from NATO member-states at the summit. They will congratulate themselves on the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi earlier this year, reiterate the alliance's support for the international mission in Afghanistan, and usher in new initiatives (or at least strengthen old ones) designed to enhance military cooperation across the European continent and its neighbors. Members will, at the same time, warn about the threats of disengagement from North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia, and discuss lessons learned from the Libya and Afghanistan missions. Expect lots of discussion about cyber warfare and "smart power."

Unfortunately, there are a few key data points that are inescapable:

- 1. Inadequate Defense Spending:** In 2010, just five out of 28 NATO members met the 2%-GDP target for defense spending. In 2011, per NATO's own estimates, that number will be down to just three: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Greece.
- 2. A Problem of Policy, Not Resources:** This is a reflection of political will, not potential capacity. Taken together, the non-US members of NATO have a larger combined population (500 million people) and a comparable, if not larger, combined GDP.
- 3. Choices and Capabilities:** The non-US members of NATO even have more men and women in uniform (2.1 million personnel vs 1.5 million US personnel). The difference is the capabilities we choose to invest in. The US expends resources on tankers, air lift, munitions, jets, and power projection (i.e., the Navy). Our comrades do not, for the most part, invest in these areas, which makes them reliant upon us even for missions in which they are the driving force (e.g., Libya).

In other words, the European members of NATO do not spend enough money on their defense programs, the money they do spend is often misdirected, and — perhaps worst of all — this is a policy decision they have made. Europe has chosen not to be able to conduct large-scale combined operations for any sustained period of time without US assistance and leadership.

The winding down of the war in Afghanistan is the backdrop to this discussion. At the summit, NATO members will build on the U.S.-Afghan agreement signed by Presidents Obama and Karzai earlier this month. The alliance's International Security Assistance Force is scheduled to withdraw from the country by the end of 2014, but for some NATO members the withdrawal has already begun. France announced in January that it would accelerate its pull-out and expects to be out completely by the end of 2013; recent elections may speed up this process even further. On the plus side, various NATO members, including the Germans, Poles, and Danes, have promised substantial sums in aid after the withdrawal. Expect more of these promises at the summit. Ultimately, though, these commitments and withdrawal schedules may depend less on what happens in Chicago — or on the battlefield for that matter — and more on what occurs at the ballot boxes in Europe.

As for NATO's next mission, only time will tell. Syria continues to simmer, if not boil, and many have understandably questioned why the Assad leadership in Damascus does not merit the same treatment as Qaddafi in Tripoli. Egypt remains a hotspot. We are just beginning to see the fallout from Libya, where thousands of missiles are missing. Additional flare-ups, potentially far more serious, may also occur in the Persian Gulf, with a fragile peace in Baghdad and a nuclearizing Iran. Will NATO have the capability to respond to the next crisis?

President Obama has an opportunity to help shape the transatlantic agenda when he speaks at the summit. It must not become a campaign event. He should point out that even in an era of budget cutting, and even under the worst-case scenario of sequestration, the American commitment to defense spending remains far stronger than any other NATO member's commitment, and will certainly exceed the 2%-GDP target. He should applaud the European soldiers, sailors, and airmen that helped bring down Qaddafi, but caution their political leaders against further military cuts. He should thank NATO for its support in Afghanistan, but insist that the alliance not accelerate the timetable for withdrawal, which is already ambitious. Obama's task, of course, will be harder due to his own lackluster commitment to defense spending and his own arbitrary timelines for withdrawing troops.

Most foreign policy experts support NATO and believe it to be an important organization. For all its flaws, NATO remains the world's strongest military alliance. In an age of budget austerity, however, the question is whether the electorates can be convinced. In June 2010, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates mused: "Future U.S. political leaders — those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me — may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost." Given the alliance's problems and the uncertainty over Afghanistan's future, that concern is perhaps more warranted today than ever.

The upcoming summit will give President Obama an excellent opportunity to make the case for NATO to the public — including, perhaps, the staffers at his own campaign headquarters down the street.