

Istanbul NATO Summit: Bridging Brussels and Baghdad?

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Brief Analysis

Will the Transatlantic Split Be Mended?

NATO's Istanbul summit, to be held on June 28-29, will be historic, marking the first such meeting in which the organization's seven new Eastern European members will participate. In fact, with these additions, NATO now borders Russia. Despite the organization's enlargement, however, a transatlantic rift seems to have prevailed within NATO for some time now. This rift is not due to a crisis of personalities. Rather, other dynamics have defined its emergence, such as Europe's transformation, the preponderance of U.S. power, and the strategic divide between Americans and Europeans as to the nature, scope, and significance of the September 11 attacks. Hence, the rift remains a structural crisis, a result of overlapping dynamics that have been developing since the end of the Cold War.

Limited Prospects

Normally, a NATO summit presents opportunities for cooperation in the transatlantic relationship. The U.S. president attempts to capitalize on his position as the leader of the alliance by pursuing specific initiatives, while European leaders take the opportunity to pay tribute to an alliance that helps them pursue their common security interests. This does not appear to be the case with the upcoming summit in Istanbul, however. Some European countries do not want to permit Washington to push forward a specific agenda. In particular, these countries feel cautious about further NATO engagement in the Middle East. Over the past couple months, European domestic political concerns regarding Iraq have increased as a result of escalating violence. U.S. plans for further NATO engagement in the region will also be stalled by the fact that many European countries either suffer from budgetary concerns (due to slow economic growth) or are simply unable to deploy troops overseas. Even NATO's Eastern

European members may offer only limited support for deeper involvement, despite their strongly Atlanticist political stance during the run-up to the war. Most of these countries have recently entered the European Union (EU). Inevitably, they will be pressed to accede to certain EU bargaining processes, thus dampening their affinity for the United States and limiting the amount of cooperation that Washington can expect to garner for new initiatives at the Istanbul summit.

A few months ago, many expected that NATO would take over some of the operations in Iraq. Currently, however, this does not appear to be an option. At best, the upcoming summit could produce Iraq initiatives such as the following: endorsement of the transfer of sovereignty to the new Iraqi Governing Council; a role for NATO in training Iraqi security forces; and perhaps even an agreement calling on the NATO secretary-general to explore options for future NATO involvement in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Cooperation in Afghanistan

More can be expected at the summit vis-a-vis Afghanistan. In general, the transatlantic partnership is in better shape there, with more than 6,000 European troops (as well as a special forces contingent from France) working alongside U.S. forces. Nevertheless, Washington has faced real difficulties in collecting some of the necessary assets from European governments to expand NATO's operations beyond Kabul. Although the Europeans believe in the Afghanistan mission, budgetary problems and the perceived dangers of operating in a distant country as well as the inability of some countries to deploy overseas will likely lead the Europeans to resist vastly expanded engagement.

The Istanbul summit may result in expanded use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan. A PRT is a combination of international military and civilian personnel based in provincial areas of Afghanistan to promote further development and reconstruction. PRTs have been well received among the Afghani people, who consequently do not view the NATO soldiers in question as occupiers. Turkey feels that NATO can learn from the PRT experience. Ankara's serious approach to NATO operations in Afghanistan is also rooted in the fact that former Turkish foreign minister Hikmet Cetin serves as the NATO civilian representative there.

Turkey's Views on NATO, the Middle East, and Reform

Regarding Turkey's potential role in the Istanbul summit, it must be remembered that the drive toward EU accession will be the single most important force in Ankara's foreign policy until at least December 2004, when the EU will decide on the Turkey's membership. One linchpin of EU policy has been to encourage member and candidate states to develop better relations in their own neighborhood. This policy, along with anxieties stemming from the Iraq war and Kurdish nationalism, has spurred Ankara to seek better relations with its neighbors, including the Muslim countries of the Middle East. As far as Ankara is concerned, these countries now have a blank slate. The recent Neighboring States Initiative, which brings Iraq and all of its neighbors together for consultations, is a product of this approach.

Reform in the Middle East. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government likes the idea of reform in the Middle East. The party sees itself as the embodiment of a successful combination of Islam and modernity and would like to see the rest of the Muslim world follow its pattern. Hence, Ankara will likely show some commitment (both at the upcoming summit and in the future) to the idea of change in the Middle East. AKP will likely condition such support on two caveats, however: first, that regional actors be given ownership over reform rather than having it imposed from above; and second, that the Arab-Israeli conflict be resolved in order for such reform to succeed.

NATO is a forum in which the U.S.-Turkish partnership stands strong. Turkey sees NATO as an effective body that has accomplished great things over the past decade (particularly in the Balkans, where it fought for the rights and protection of Bosnians and Albanians). As one of NATO's earliest members, Turkey feels a commitment to the organization and would like to see it succeed. At the same time, many Turks are skeptical about both NATO

engagement in Iraq and the idea of reform in the Middle East. Few Turkish citizens or members of the country's foreign policy community are convinced that reform can succeed in the region.

In order to boost its domestic support, AKP has thus far used popular foreign policy issues such as EU accession, resolution of the Cyprus issue, and dissatisfaction with the Iraq war (which met with widespread opposition among the Turkish public). Hence, the biggest challenge for AKP with regard to supporting NATO involvement in Iraq and reform in the Middle East is that neither of these two issues has gained the backing of the Turkish people. If AKP supports either of these initiatives, it would for the first time be pursuing unpopular foreign policy goals. To overcome this hurdle, Ankara could argue that participation in these two endeavors would enhance Turkey's global stature. In other words, AKP could try to convince the Turkish public that, by actively pursuing change in the Middle East, Turkey can transform itself from an object of foreign policy to a key player in foreign affairs.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Nazli Gencsoy, a research assistant in The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program.

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