NATO's Transformative Powers

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Apr 2, 2004

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The year 2004 will go down in the annals of history as the year when NATO met the Greater Middle East. In the Istanbul summit on June 28-29, NATO is planning to admit seven Eastern European countries, thereby extending its borders to the Caucasus and the Middle East. Over the coming months, the organization is also expected to take over the Coalition Provisional Authority's South-Central sector in Iraq (currently under Polish-Spanish military control) and increase its commitment to Afghanistan by deploying to cities outside Kabul. Then, as never before, NATO will be projecting itself into the Greater Middle East, an area that is occupying an increasingly central place in U.S. foreign policy.

No country is better poised to catalyze this process than Turkey, currently the only Middle Eastern NATO member. Turkey's role would be one of logic and convenience. As the host of NATO's June summit, Turkey has a historic opportunity to connect Brussels with Baghdad. For its own sake, NATO should grasp this chance to set up a center in Turkey to coordinate its relations with the Greater Middle East.

While Brussels would continue to serve as NATO headquarters and oversee the organization's transatlantic agenda, a new center in Turkey would use the organization's experience with former Communist countries in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program to promote regional security and democratization efforts in the Greater Middle East. Over the past decade, PfP's performance-based membership strategy, whereby countries are given access to the prized goal of higher-level NATO assistance only after demonstrating their deep commitment to democracy, has helped former Communist states in Eastern Europe build strong, working democracies.

Indeed, PfP could serve as a model for political change in the Middle East. First, the Turkish NATO center would revive NATO's ongoing security talks with southern Mediterranean countries -- the so-called "Mediterranean Dialogue" involving Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. These talks, which have more often than not maintained the status quo in the region since their inception in 1994, urgently need to be resuscitated from their current state of lethargy.

Second, NATO's renewed commitment to the Mediterranean Dialogue countries could influence greater emphasis on liberalization/democratization initiatives. A revised Mediterranean Dialogue, to be called the "Partnership Action Plan" (PAP), may serve as the basis of a new NATO-Middle East initiative. Under this plan, the aforementioned southern Mediterranean states, as well as other willing Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Iraq, Jordan, Afghanistan, a

future Palestinian state, and various north African and Persian Gulf countries), would join PAP if and when they satisfied its performance-based accession rules.

These guidelines could include liberalization/democratization criteria such as honoring international human-rights conventions, guaranteeing freedom of the press, facilitating equal rights for women, and conducting free elections. To the degree that member countries satisfied PAP's accession rules, NATO's new center would offer closer cooperation. Far from lumping dozens of countries into an all-inclusive yet cumbersome NATO club, PAP would offer each candidate a customized relationship with the organization.

In this regard, PAP would be a two-way street. Not only would it help address a number of pressing Western concerns, including the fight against terror and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, it would also help reduce such transnational threats as global migration and smuggling.

On the other hand, PAP would also provide advantages for the Middle Eastern candidate-countries. PfP countries in Eastern Europe were drawn into democratization and cooperation with NATO via the twin lures of military assistance and access to a credible security umbrella. Today, PAP could attract Middle Eastern states by offering them similar benefits: valuable NATO military training in certain areas and, more important, the vested coverage of a collective-security organization in the world's most volatile region.

There would be three other benefits to a Turkish NATO center. First, such a center could help provide logistics support for the organization's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, recommitting the U.S. and Turkey to Iraq's security could help strengthen strategic U.S.-Turkish ties, challenged over the past year owing to policy differences on Iraq. A security partnership of Washington, Ankara, and Baghdad would alleviate Turkey's fears regarding a Kurdish state in Iraq, and lessen the likelihood of conflict between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds.

Finally, a Turkish NATO center could help pull Central Asia and the Caucasus -- the frontier lands of the Greater Middle East -- into NATO's orbit. As the economic and geographical focal-point of these incendiary regions, Turkey would bring NATO's democratizing appeal nearer to the fledgling democracies there. Even after this year's NATO expansion, twelve states in Central Asia, the Caucasus (and the Balkans) will retain PfP designation. All these states share close historical, ethnic, or religious ties with Turkey and ten of them are either Muslim-majority states or have large Muslim communities. With a NATO center in hand, Turkey would be well-situated to link these countries to NATO's security structures, bringing them politically closer to the Western world.

In 2004, NATO will transform its post-Cold War political commitments into operational realities. Turkey will be on the global stage throughout the year. It is up to NATO, Ankara, and Washington to promote the Istanbul summit as a new opportunity for security and freedom for the Greater Middle East.

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