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NATO's 60th Anniversary Summit: Unfocused and Unsuccessful

Sally McNamara

In spite of President Obama's high personal approval ratings among Europeans, he did not further American interests at NATO's 60th anniversary summit last weekend.

The President was unable to secure much-needed European combat troops for the mission in Afghanistan, and the lengthier-than-usual summit declaration put on ice crucial agenda items such as enlargement of the alliance and missile defense.

The summit was a quintessentially European affair, advancing Franco-German priorities such as an EU defense identity and an upgrading of NATO-Russian relations. And for the first time in an official communiqué, climate change was categorized as a safety and security issue.¹

Missile Defense. Although President Obama has not formally withdrawn from the Bush Administration's agreements with Warsaw and Prague to deploy elements of a U.S. missile defense shield in Europe, he has sent a series of messages signaling that he does not intend to honor these agreements. Unlike the Bucharest declaration² and the foreign ministers' communiqué of December 2008,³ this weekend's Strasbourg-Kehl declaration does not specifically endorse the "third site" deployment of 10 interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic.

Speaking in Prague following the NATO summit, President Obama gave a keynote speech focusing on complete nuclear disarmament whereby missile defenses would be unnecessary. He went on to condition the third site deployment on several factors,

including cost-effectiveness, workability, and a proven Iranian nuclear threat.⁴ These subjective assessments—in addition to the \$1.4 billion in budget cuts announced by Defense Secretary Robert Gates to the overall U.S. missile defense program—make the European deployment hugely unlikely.⁵

In the absence of U.S. leadership on missile defense, NATO has produced an agenda for inaction. The Strasbourg-Kehl declaration stated that "additional work is still required" before NATO can advance its position on missile defense and that this issue will not be considered until the next summit.⁶ It is clear that the alliance is waiting on direction from the United States and that American abandonment of the third site installations lowers the alliance's willingness to contribute to a layered missile defense program.

Afghanistan. Despite President Obama's spin that the Strasbourg-Kehl summit was not a "pledging conference," the U.S. Administration's new "surge" strategy in Afghanistan did not receive the much-needed additional commitment of combat troops from NATO's Continental allies. Only Britain pledged more combat troops: Up to 1,000 British soldiers will join the 8,300 others already serving,

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largely in the south of Afghanistan.⁷ In total, European nations committed just 5,000 non-combatant troops, 3,000 of whom will deploy solely for the August election in Afghanistan.⁸

This response does not equate to either “strong” or “unanimous” backing for the President’s new strategy on Afghanistan.⁹ Afghanistan is the Obama Administration’s stated top foreign policy priority. Consequently, a benchmark of success during this summit was President Obama’s ability to coalesce the alliance around his new Afghanistan strategy. Continental Europe’s lack of commitments has created a two-tiered alliance within NATO, which Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described bluntly as “some allies willing to fight and die to protect people’s security and others who are not.”¹⁰

Russia. President Obama advanced his nuclear disarmament agenda by proposing new strategic arms-control talks with Russia.¹¹ His Administration’s policy of resetting relations with Russia was

further enhanced at the NATO summit. The summit’s declaration was explicit in strengthening the alliance’s relationship with Moscow, including measures to link NATO’s missile defense programs with Russia and introduce transparency and confidence-building measures.¹² The declaration also formally announced the immediate reconstitution of the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) and pledged to upgrade and expand relations between NATO and Russia through the NRC.¹³

Although Central and Eastern European nations were probably responsible for moderating language in alternate paragraphs (for example, criticizing Russia for its military build-up in South Ossetia and Abkhazia) the Russia-first tone—led by America, France, and Germany—overwhelmingly characterized the declaration.¹⁴ For example, despite an endorsement of NATO’s open-door enlargement policy, Georgian and Ukrainian accession to NATO’s Membership Action Plan was not advanced at this

1. Press release, “Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration,” issued by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg/Kehl, item 60, April 4, 2009, at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease (April 8, 2009).
2. “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” issued by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest, April 3, 2008, at www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html (April 8, 2009).
3. Press release, “Final Communiqué of the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the Level of Foreign Ministers,” NATO, December 3, 2008, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-153e.html> (April 8, 2009).
4. Toby Harnden and Bruno Waterfield, “Barack Obama Goes Ahead with Missile Defence Shield Despite Disarmament Pledge,” *The Telegraph*, April 6, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/5110918/Barack-Obama-goes-ahead-with-missile-defence-shield-despite-disarmament-pledge.html> (April 8, 2009).
5. “Lawmakers Warn Slashing Missile Defense Leaves U.S. Vulnerable,” Fox News, April 7, 2009, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/first100days/2009/04/07/lawmakers-warn-missile-defense-cuts-leave-vulnerable> (April 8, 2009).
6. Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration, Item 51.
7. Michael Lea, “NATO Allies Join UK in Pledge to Send More Troops to Afghanistan,” *Daily Mail*, April 4, 2009, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1167181/Nato-allies-join-UK-pledge-send-troops-Afghanistan.html> (April 8, 2009).
8. Hans Nichols and Edwin Chen, “Obama Says 5,000 More NATO Troops Will Be Sent to Afghanistan,” Bloomberg, April 4, 2009, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601091&sid=aEs0wpr5bLLM&refer=india> (April 8, 2009).
9. Ahto Lobjakas, “NATO Summit Show Mood Grows Sunnier, but Trans-Atlantic Divides Persist,” Radio Free Europe, April 4, 2009, at http://www.rferl.org/content/NATO_Summit_Show_Mood_Grows_Sunnier_But_TransAtlantic_Divides_Persist/1602175.html (April 8, 2009).
10. Roger Cohen, “The Long Haul in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/28/opinion/28cohen.html?8ty&emc=ty> (April 8, 2009).
11. Michael D. Shear and Scott Wilson, “On European Trip, President Tries to Set a New, Pragmatic Tone,” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/04/AR2009040400700.html> (April 8, 2009).
12. “Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration,” Item 54.
13. *Ibid.*, Item 35.
14. *Ibid.*, Item 34.

summit.¹⁵ The compromise agreed to at the Bucharest summit, which relegates NATO–Georgian–Ukrainian relations to commission status, will stand for the foreseeable future.¹⁶

By taking both missile defense and NATO enlargement off the agenda, President Obama has capitulated to Russian red lines as outlined by President Dmitry Medvedev in a *Washington Post* op-ed published immediately before the NATO summit.¹⁷ More importantly, it represents acquiescence to Moscow’s “Zone of Privileged Interests” policy.

NATO–EU Relations. France’s reintegration into NATO’s command structures was advanced along with an explicit endorsement of an independent defense identity for the European Union.¹⁸ The declaration recognizes the autonomy of the EU as a defense actor and promotes closer NATO–EU cooperation.

President Nicolas Sarkozy has finally realized France’s long-term ambition: to give the EU primacy in European security affairs. When General de Gaulle withdrew from the integrated command structure in 1966 and ejected NATO troops from France, he argued that separate European defense arrangements would never be constructed while

NATO existed. France’s reintegration into the command of NATO’s most senior positions—France has reportedly been given the Supreme Command, Allied Command Transformation, and the operations headquarter, Joint Command Lisbon—puts Paris in a position to Europeanize NATO concurrently with its construction of EU security structures that exclude American influence completely.¹⁹

Failures and Missed Opportunities. Although President Obama proved to be popular during his European tour, he also proved incapable of transforming that popularity into concrete actions to further America’s national interests. He failed to secure much sought after European commitments for Afghanistan and failed to advance difficult agenda items during the NATO summit. During a tour where he apologized for American arrogance, President Obama failed to demonstrate American leadership in Europe and missed an opportunity to revitalize the NATO alliance.²⁰

—Sally McNamara is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

15. *Ibid.*, Item 21.

16. *Ibid.*, Item 29.

17. Dmitry A. Medvedev, “Building Russian-U.S. Bonds,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/30/AR2009033002443.html> (April 8, 2009).

18. Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration,” Items 5 and 20.

19. en Hall and James Blitz, “Command Accord Presages French Return to NATO,” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2009, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fbc2122a-f323-11dd-abe6-0000779fd2ac.html> (April 8, 2009).

20. oby Harnden, “Barack Obama: ‘Arrogant US Has Been Dismissive’ to Allies,” *The Telegraph*, April 3, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/5100338/Barack-Obama-arrogant-US-has-been-dismissive-to-allies.html> (April 8, 2009).