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After bin Laden: NATO's Resolve Against Terrorism Must Not Waver

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Earlier this month, U.S. military personnel dispatched one of the world's most wanted terrorists and marked a significant victory in the war on terrorism. The death of Osama bin Laden was warmly welcomed by NATO leaders, including British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has rightly warned that members should not be complacent about the continued terrorist threat facing the transatlantic alliance.

NATO should continue to be vigilant in its counterterrorism efforts and enhance its capabilities consistent with the level of ambition outlined in the 2010 Strategic Concept. Above all, NATO members should redouble their efforts in Afghanistan and ensure that bin Laden's death does not lead to a premature withdrawal of coalition forces just as progress is being made there.

European Reactions. The death of bin Laden was welcomed across Europe. Cameron stated, "It is a strike at the heart of international terrorism, and a great achievement for America and for all who have joined in the long struggle to defeat Al Qaeda."¹ Merkel's spokesman stated: "The forces of freedom were successful."² European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said in a joint statement: "This is a major achievement in our efforts to rid the world of terrorism.... [Bin Laden's] death makes the world a safer place and shows that such crimes do not remain unpunished."³

However, each has stressed that the death of bin Laden does not mean "mission accomplished" in the war on terrorism. Rasmussen stated that "terrorist networks still exist, and we're in Afghanistan to prevent the country from ever again becoming a safe haven for terrorism."⁴ It is important that members do not see bin Laden's death as an opportunity to head toward the exit door in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan. The NATO alliance went to war in Afghanistan on the back of a U.N. resolution and its only ever invocation of the Article 5 mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty. The goal remains the same today: to eradicate the Taliban and stop Afghanistan from once again becoming a state sponsor of international terrorism. NATO should use bin Laden's death to reaffirm its broad strategic and foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan:

- To prevent Afghanistan from sliding into civil war and allowing the reemergence of the Taliban;
- To assist Afghans in the construction of a peaceful, stable, and sovereign nation-state that is viable after the departure of U.S. and NATO troops; and
- To push for a regional settlement.⁵

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The December 2010 White House review on Afghanistan has stated that progress has been made since the U.S. and coalition forces surged 40,000 additional troops and civilian support staff last year to support the counterinsurgency strategy. However, Afghanistan remains extremely fragile, and President Obama's plan to withdraw troops starting this July has been unhelpful to the overall strategy.

NATO and Counterterrorism. In 2003, NATO agreed on a *Military Concept for Defense Against Terrorism*. It called for the alliance to be proactive in deterring terrorist attacks and identified the capabilities that would be required to implement the strategy, including precision-guided weapons, substantial troop levels on a high state of readiness, and the capacity to deploy to any theatre of war.⁶ The Strategic Concept agreed to in Lisbon in November 2010 stated once again that the alliance needs more appropriate military capabilities to counter terrorism.⁷

As the NATO mission in Libya has demonstrated, NATO's European members have not matched their capabilities with their level of ambition. They continue to rely heavily on the U.S. for precision-guided weapons. In Afghanistan, NATO has struggled with force generation issues since the start of the mission in 2003, and the alliance has severely limited strategic reach capacity.

Recommendations. To ensure that NATO maintains a robust defense against terrorism:

- The U.S. and NATO should maintain troop levels in Afghanistan until progress is solid and irreversible;
- NATO's European allies should support training Afghan national security forces by providing additional mentors, trainers, embedded training teams, and equipment;
- NATO should agree on a Military Implementing Plan by June on the critical defense capabilities that are required to implement the new Strategic Concept; and
- All members should recommit to spending at least 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense.

Turn Words into Action. Osama bin Laden's death is a shot in the arm for the NATO alliance. It marks an important stepping stone to eventual victory in Afghanistan—but it does not mean that victory is assured.

The alliance should also continue to increase its capability to confront terrorism elsewhere in the world. Current levels of defense spending have struggled to sustain even limited operations such as the mission in Libya. It is time for NATO to turn its words into action.

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