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Five Principles That Should Guide U.S. Policy Toward NATO

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Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has played a vital role in the defense and security of Europe. This role has been carried out primarily through the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Today, the U.S. commitment to NATO is not about protecting Europeans from the threat of Soviet Communism; it is about ensuring America's strategic reach in Eurasia, Africa, and the Middle East. With strong American leadership, NATO can continue to advance U.S. security and defense interests.

NATO Is Still Important Today. During the Cold War, the threat from the Soviet Union meant that NATO had a clearly defined mission. Today, NATO is still trying to find its place in the post-Cold War world. With declining defense spending across Europe and the lack of political will

to use military force, coupled with the Obama Administration's "pivot" to Asia and support for EU defense integration, there is a serious risk that NATO will become irrelevant.

To prevent this from happening, NATO needs American leadership and vision. The following five principles should guide U.S. policy toward NATO. Without these core principles, NATO will cease being the most capable security alliance the world has ever known.

1. The U.S. should support a transformed NATO. It is in the interests of the U.S. to have a transformed NATO that is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century. For example, many threats that have been previously described as emerging, like cyber threats, are in fact a reality now and should be treated with the seriousness they deserve. As shipping increases in the Arctic and natural resource exploration begins to bear fruit in that region, NATO will need to play a more active role there as well.

While NATO has been good at identifying the trend of future threats, its members have not

been good at funding the capabilities needed to address them. NATO's Smart Defense initiative runs the risk of allowing European countries to believe that they can do more with less, when in actuality they will be doing less with less. Smart Defense has been the topic of countless conferences, meetings, and seminars across Europe but has resulted in very little beyond a list of aspirations. Recently, Allied Ground Surveillance (AGS) and Baltic Air Policing have been touted as great examples of Smart Defense. The development of AGS took 20 years—hardly a model for Smart Defense. The addition of Baltic Air Policing in 2004 was the natural extension of the comprehensive system of air surveillance that has been in place since the 1970s—not particularly a new way of doing business. Perhaps a better example of Smart Defense is Ballistic Missile Defense. Here, more of America's NATO allies can shoulder some of the burden. For Smart Defense to work, it requires real military capability and real money. No clever nomenclature can get around this problem.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3536>

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2. The U.S. should support an enlarged NATO. NATO has done more to stabilize and defend democracy in Western Europe, and expand it to Eastern Europe after the Cold War, than any other organization, including the European Union. The U.S. should support NATO enlargement when a country meets the criteria to join the alliance. No country outside NATO should have a veto over another country's ambition to join NATO. At the upcoming Chicago Summit, Georgia should be given a Membership Action Plan, and Macedonia should be granted full membership. The door should be left open for other members, especially in the Balkans. Further NATO expansion in that region—when the time is right—will make Europe more secure.

3. The U.S. should support a nuclear NATO. The threats associated with nuclear proliferation make the world more dangerous today than it was during the Cold War. This is why it is important that NATO maintains its “nuclear culture.” Encouraged by the Obama Administration's policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament, some in NATO have suggested that American tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are a Cold War anachronism and should be removed. The U.S. must ensure that tactical nuclear weapons remain part of the alliance's nuclear strategy.

NATO members that host American nuclear weapons

must maintain the Dual Capable Aircraft required to deliver them. This is an important and often-overlooked part of alliance burden sharing. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept stated that “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance.” As long as there is any likelihood of a nuclear threat against the West made from any part of the world, NATO must remain a nuclear alliance.

4. The U.S. should support the primacy of NATO. American decision makers are so desperate for European partners to increase their defense budgets that they have fallen prey to the mistaken assumption that EU defense integration will lead to increased military capabilities that could be used by NATO. At the 2009 NATO Summit in Strasbourg, President Obama said that the U.S. supports “a strong European defense.”¹ Across Europe, this was taken as a green light to push EU defense integration to the detriment of NATO. As EU defense initiatives have diverted scarce resources away from NATO, the Obama Administration has failed to back NATO. Every euro or pound wasted on EU defense is one less that could be invested in NATO.

The European Union can never be a serious defense actor, because it has six neutral member states,² and it excludes two important NATO defense partners, Norway and Turkey, from its defense and

security decision-making process. Furthermore, NATO and the EU cannot formally cooperate because Cyprus regularly blocks NATO–EU cooperation for self-serving reasons. Therefore, EU defense initiatives are not only a waste of resources but also are politically pointless.

5. The U.S. needs to show NATO that it remains committed to Europe. With the Obama Administration's new focus on the Asia–Pacific region, many in Europe wonder what this means for the future of NATO. Today, there are approximately 80,000 U.S. service personnel from all branches of the military based in Europe. They are spread across 28 main operating bases, primarily in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain. These forces play a major role in building the capacity of NATO allies in ways that benefit the United States. This U.S. troop presence in Europe is the most visible sign of U.S. support for NATO. The Administration is seeking to substantially reduce the U.S. military footprint in Europe. This sends the wrong signal on America's commitment to transatlantic security, and these cuts should be reversed.

What the U.S. Should Do.

Underpinning all of these principles is the requirement for NATO to succeed in its current operations. Whether it is the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, combating piracy off the Horn of Africa, or the

1. Press release, “Remarks by President Obama at Strasbourg Town Hall,” The White House, April 3, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-at-Strasbourg-Town-Hall (March 8, 2012).
2. Cyprus, Malta, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, and Austria.

NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan, if NATO cannot meet its objectives, then the future of the alliance is in doubt. Furthermore, the U.S. must continue to privately and publicly pressure European partners to invest in defense. Regrettably, with recent U.S. defense cuts, the Obama Administration is in a weak position to do this.

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