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NATO needs new lease

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By Friis Arne Petersen and Hans Binnendijk - NATO leaders gather in Bucharest this week with hard-pressed missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo hanging in the balance. Our troops in the field keep refining ad hoc arrangements with civil counterparts to stay just ahead of instability. At Bucharest, NATO needs to do better. It is time our brave forces and civilians were backed by more than patchwork agreements among critical actors.

Leaders meeting in Bucharest know they are in a race against time; straining to get war-torn societies on the path to sustained recovery before public support at home erodes. They also know NATO cannot succeed alone. The United Nations, European Union and other highly capable international organizations harbor vast civil and financial capabilities to restore public safety, governance and economic viability — stabilizing factors that must re-emerge before any society can stand on its own again. These organizations and others should commit to a comprehensive international approach to conflict resolution.

The debate on Afghanistan has focused on mobilizing additional military forces for NATO, and there is broad agreement on that as a precondition for success. There is equal conviction that peace cannot be achieved by military power alone. Cooperation cobbled together in the field is not enough — often it comes too late, too much time and resources are wasted, too many mistakes are made and, sadly, too many lives are lost.

Ad hoc arrangements risk failure. NATO and other institutions have to be more than pick-up partners. All involved must plan and work together for the long term, most especially NATO and the European Union. The EU is NATO's most capable and natural civilian partner. Some European officials represent their nations in both organizations. No doubt both would be far more effective if they would team in Brussels before they meet in the field; building a strong bridge between the Alliance's "hard" military effort with the EU's reconstruction and development work.

Unfortunately, taking advantage of natural NATO-EU relations faces unnatural obstacles. The two organizations have yet to establish effective cooperation due to age-old bureaucratic-institutional disagreements related to some countries being members of NATO but not the EU (Turkey), or vice versa (Cyprus).

Furthermore, countries like France have until recently been cautious about expanding NATO's role into nonmilitary security areas. It is critical that EU and NATO members get beyond these barriers and find ways to work together on challenges that confront the trans-Atlantic community. This is what members expect.

No big headlines on NATO-EU relations are expected at Bucharest, though there should be for the sake of trans-Atlantic relations as well as the people of Afghanistan and Kosovo. The issue of NATO-EU cooperation is at the heart of efforts to make progress on developing a comprehensive approach to crises response, in particular, stabilization and reconstruction operations that reset the institutions and economies of war torn societies.

At Bucharest NATO, which includes most EU members, has an opportunity to begin bringing these two institutions together. The anticipated adoption at Bucharest of a new strategic vision for NATO's mission in Afghanistan, and the call for new strategic concepts for NATO as well as the EU, provide the necessary context for a collective international approach to conflict resolution — one with substantive, cooperative institutional roles for NATO and the EU at its core. Leaders at Bucharest have a chance to set this process in motion, if they seize the opportunity.

There is important work being done on both sides of the Atlantic to improve the nonmilitary component of crisis operations. This has been lacking for years but clearly there is a recognition we cannot succeed in Afghanistan — or the next mission we undertake — without a strengthened civilian element as part of a comprehensive approach to peace missions.

The U.S. government is establishing a civilian reserve corps to ensure that the necessary nonmilitary resources are available for deployment — alongside the military. Similar efforts have been under way in many European countries.

Looking beyond issues of troop levels and restrictions on units operating in Afghanistan, creating a common approach to reconstruction and development is an obvious area for trans-Atlantic cooperation. Europe and the United States should work together on joint training, sharing lessons learned and best practices in this area, not only to ensure our militaries and civilians in the field share a common approach, but also to harmonize the oversight, objectives and resources of every country and institution engaged. NATO is an important framework for creating this common approach. But durable and effective links to the European Union, the United Nations and others are no less important.

Mounting a comprehensive approach to stabilization and reconstruction will require a concerted international effort by many working as one. That is the clear lesson learned from Afghanistan and Kosovo. Europe and the United States are in full agreement on this. The challenge is to start turning that agreement into a coherent and effective strategy — melding civil and military efforts. With clear direction from the Bucharest summit trans-Atlantic partners can get on with this work.

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