

What is the future of NATO?

Organization searches on

From Laura Neack,
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NATO Unity: Elusive and Illusive

President Obama wants a unified multinational response to thwart Russian threats to Ukraine and to vanquish the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). A unified multinational response fits the president's view that the United States should always share with others the burden for maintaining international security and stability. This makes practical sense – no country should attempt such heavy lifting alone and probably wouldn't succeed if it tried.

At the NATO Summit in Cardiff, Wales, the alliance members pledged to remain focused on these same issues, as well as security threats from North Africa. But this pledge doesn't mean NATO as a group will fulfill Obama's vision of a unified grand alliance responding to disparate threats to international security. Even during the Cold War NATO's ability to act as a unified whole was questioned, and after the Cold War NATO seems even less inclined to act as one.



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Look at recent history. The NATO allies pledged to stand with the United States in Afghanistan after 9/11, but the Bush administration generally disregarded or rebuffed the allies and ordered them to out-of-the-way locations of little concern to the U.S. military. And then, when finally called upon to act, the allies were slow to respond and often failed to fill their own basic needs for equipment

and transportation. This was an instance in which the allies were much more willing to help. The next stop was Iraq, and most NATO allies didn't agree at all about that war, and so they opted out.

The Obama administration changed tone with the allies in Afghanistan and even started talking about the U.S. mission in Afghanistan as part of the NATO operation (as opposed to NATO being auxiliary to the U.S. mission). But disunity prevailed. By the time some European countries wanted a unified military action against Qaddafi in Libya, prominent NATO ally Germany refused to take part. Soon after that it was impossible to coordinate a unified NATO response to the Syrian war, even when that war created problems for NATO ally Turkey. NATO's efforts regarding Syria have been limited to placing three patriot missile batteries in Turkey to defend it.

When a substantial threat to Mali's new interim government appeared in the form of a ragtag but effective collection of fighters and bandits in Mali's north, the French took the lead and sent in troops with U.S. transportation assistance. Britain reluctantly followed. NATO was silent on Mali, giving a hollow ring to last week's NATO pledge to remain focused on security threats in North Africa.

NATO allies don't act in a unified response to security threats in the world whether in, near or far from Europe and the trans-Atlantic. NATO unity is elusive and illusive.

NATO will continue to be a mechanism for military exercises and training – and such activities do help prepare for coordination between subsets of NATO members who form coalitions of the willing to respond to particular security threats. NATO will continue to be a forum in which allies and partners develop common doctrines about the role of militaries in the 21st century. NATO will continue to be a place for military pageantry, as was on display in Cardiff at the Summit and at numerous flag-changing ceremonies in various locales.

But NATO will not be what President Obama wants it to be – a unified and active instrument for promoting international security and stability. NATO can't be expected to do what the United Nations has never been able to do, and the fault is not with these organizations but their members. The member states have always picked their own fights, or they chose not to see their own interests in others' fights, and they always will.

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