

After the Summit: What's Next for NATO?

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Katherine Lanpher (KL): Let's start off with a sort of general laundry list. There were things that we know the NATO summit had to accomplish. If you were going to pick one or two specific decisions that actually got made, what would you go with?

Charles Kupchan (CK): I think the headline was Afghanistan. The leaders went into the meeting wanting to get a clear plan and a clear timetable for getting out and they arrived at that – to wind down combat operations by the middle of 2013 and to get the troops out by 2014. Finding a plan, a consensus on winding the war down, I think the summit was a success.

KL: Justin, I want to go to you right away with a comment on the new president of France. In many ways this was his international debut as a leader. He did make an election promise to pull French troops in Afghanistan earlier than other NATO members might like. How do you judge his performance there? What does his election mean for NATO?

Justin Vaisse (JV): He found himself in the classic situation of a president or prime minister elected after having made campaign promises and having to reconcile these promises with the international community and his partners. No one would've thought that just five days after being inaugurated he would just renege on the other pledge he had made. So so that's on the one hand, on the other hand trying to sort of soothe the pain for the Obama administration, it is a dent in alliance solidarity, but because he added some sweeteners like the facts that combat troops would be out at the end of 2012, we will still have French soldiers in 2013 either for a training of the Afghan army and police or for logistics, I think he struck a good balance.

KL: Can we talk about the price tag that NATO was supposed to come up with? People are supposed to at the very least pledge money so that when Afghanistan is on it's own, the police and the military that training, it all needs to be paid for somehow. How did the summit do in terms of other NATO countries ponying up the money?

CK: I think the issue of finding the money to pay for the training of the Afghan army, to pay their salaries, is this: a work in progress. Part of the reason I think NATO is heading for the exits is there is growing skepticism about the war and about achieving the original objectives of the war – that is beating back the Taliban and making sure al-Qaeda doesn't come back. But there is also a financial crisis on both sides of the Atlantic and people are saying it's time to spend money at home, not in Afghanistan. I think moving forward there will be some tough conversations in Brussels and bilaterally among the NATO allies about who is going to put up what kind of money in Afghanistan. I think looking forward they're likely to be shortfalls on that front because the general trend is going to be downsizing the effort in the country, not putting in more money.

KL: When we're talking about Pakistan reopening the supply routes to NATO troops in Afghanistan and she got down to dollar amounts per truck. \$250 on one side, \$5,000 on another. It did not get solved at the summit so how is this going to affect the rest of the mission?

CK: I think part of the reason that President Obama and his European counterparts have soured on the mission is that you can't solve Afghanistan if you can't work with Pakistan. I think the frustration in the United States and NATO generally stems in part from the degree to which Pakistan has really not been a helpful player. But behind this disagreement about how much to pay per truck is a deep mistrust. The Pakistanis [are] fueled by a current of anti-Americanism. The United States very frustrated with the government in Pakistan. I don't think you're going to see a repair in the relationship in a way that really solves what's called the Af-Pak problem.

KL: The United States recently signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan which says the US will have some kind of involvement until 2024. What European countries and in making similar commitments?

JV: Many of them have already signed pledges with the Karzai government to sustain their efforts and keep the development aid and support for police and armed forces. It's the case of France, since we were mentioning that country, because of the pledge to withdraw before 2012. On the one hand there is this pledge. On the other hand, there is a bilateral commitment that has been made between the French government and the Afghan government to keep helping in the long term with hundreds of millions of dollars of aid. The difficulty is coming up with enough resources in the midst of a financial crisis where budgets have to be cut and a situation in which – also military budgets have been under considerable stress – that have been decreased throughout Europe. [This] is another issue that was tackled at the NATO summit.

CK: If I could just jump in for a second... I think part of the concern among NATO allies is sending a message to Afghans that – unlike the last time when there was a Western presence, when they were fighting the Soviets – the United States and its allies are not going to cut and run in 2014 and be there for the long haul. Secondly, even though President Obama and his allies have decided that they can begin the wind down, there is a pressing strategic mission moving forward. That is retaining enough of a footprint in Afghanistan to go after al-Qaeda, should they attempt to come back into the country and to carry out continuing strikes in Pakistan, particularly using drones.

KL: In the past ten years NATO's engaged in two major campaigns: one in Libya and one in Afghanistan. Looking ahead to the next ten years – go ahead, get out the crystal ball – and tell me what you think we're looking at?

CK: Even though the headlines of the summit were about Afghanistan this was in some ways the first post-Afghanistan discussion – trying to map out NATO's future. I think that's why they discussed two things in addition to Afghanistan in Chicago. One was called smart defense and the other is global partnerships. The smart defense issue is to try to get Europe to do more militarily – not by spending more money because that's not going to happen in an era of financial crisis – but to pool resources to get more capability by working together. I think there's fear that unless Europe stands up as a stronger pillar, the Atlantic alliance will be weakened. Secondly, is to try to make NATO relevant globally. I think it's clear that in the aftermath of Afghanistan and Libya, NATO isn't going to be doing a lot of intervening.

JV: There are always strategic surprises, like Libya. Libya – a couple of weeks even before the intervention – was on very few people's map so we don't know what the future will hold. But at the same time, the direction that NATO is taking in general is toward retraction or a diminution of its capacities because of the financial crisis. What I foresee is a number of years where NATO will be sort of shy, if you like, in terms of intervention, with very little appetite for taking new interventions unless it's forced to do so. Before there's a new cause, I see either for the issue of enlargement or for global alliance or military intervention, an alliance that will try to minimize the cost of the decrease of defense budgets but not much more appetite for conquering new horizons.