



CRS Issue Statement on NATO

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2009. While NATO members can point to several significant accomplishments since the end of the Cold War, the alliance faces a host of new challenges that might well define the purpose and role of NATO in the 21st century. At the same time, most observers agree that the 111th Congress and the Obama Administration will continue to view NATO as the key alliance through which to confront security threats to the Euro-Atlantic community, including the principal threats of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For the short and medium term, most analysts expect NATO's political agenda to be dominated by its mission in Afghanistan (the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF), by its relations with Russia, and by the drafting of a new Strategic Concept for the alliance.

Observers consider the stabilization of Afghanistan to be NATO's key mission. Nonetheless, in the view of some, the mission has challenged NATO's solidarity and has eroded public confidence in the alliance. The allies continue to struggle to meet troop level targets, "caveats" or restrictions that member states place on the utilization of their forces, corruption in the Kabul government, the inability of the Pakistani government to control the use of its territory by insurgents, and the level of civilian expertise and financial assistance being provided for the reconstruction effort. Many believe the security situation in Afghanistan has not shown significant improvement over the past eight years and several allies are talking of "out-of-area" fatigue with respect to the ISAF operation. Two allies have announced plans to withdraw their forces from the mission in the coming year, and others have expressed doubts about a longer-term commitment to Afghanistan. Many believe NATO's future ability to influence political or military events around the globe will be determined by the success it can achieve in Afghanistan. Congress has closely examined NATO operations in Afghanistan through hearings, and supported them by funding U.S. reconstruction efforts and combat forces. As the U.S. continues to send more resources to Afghanistan, calls from Congress for increased and more effective allied assistance could become more pronounced.

NATO-Russia relations deteriorated in 2008 as Russia vocally opposed U.S. and alliance proposals to strengthen relations with Georgia and Ukraine and as ties in the NATO-Russia Council were suspended in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict. Russia's continued criticism of alliance policies ranging from enlargement to missile defense and its calls for an alternative European security architecture have exposed divisions within the alliance on how to approach Moscow. Although formal ties in the NATO-Russia Council resumed in mid-2009, the alliance continues to reassess its relations with Russia. Some member states that feel particularly threatened by Russia, such as Poland and the Baltic states, express concern that NATO has not taken a strong enough stance against Russia's assertive behavior. Others have attempted to view Russia as a "strategic partner" and emphasize pragmatic cooperation and engagement. Administration officials have emphasized the need to engage Russia in an effort to improve U.S.- and NATO-Russia cooperation in areas ranging from ISAF's mission in Afghanistan and counter-terrorism to arms control, non-proliferation, and international efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, NATO and U.S. officials stress that they will continue to oppose Russian policies that they perceive as conflicting with the core values of the alliance.

An additional issue that could test political unity within NATO during the second session of the 111th Congress is the debate over a new Strategic Concept for the alliance. In late 2009, the alliance launched the drafting of a new Strategic Concept as a means to clarify NATO's purpose and future direction. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is to present NATO member states with a draft proposal for a new Strategic Concept in September 2010. NATO leaders are expected to approve a final document at their November 2010 summit in Lisbon.

Proponents of a new Strategic Concept argue that the existing concept, written in 1999, does not adequately reflect events that have transpired since the terrorist attacks of 2001 and that it lacks a long-term vision that can be effectively communicated to the public. While most allies appear to continue to support NATO “transformation” to include, among other things, “out of areas missions,” several may argue that NATO should be more selective when deciding to confront new security challenges. Differences over the extent to which NATO should continue to evolve into a “global,” “expeditionary” alliance, or whether it should refocus on territorial defense could cause considerable friction among the allies.

In addition to Afghanistan, Russia, and the new Strategic Concept, NATO members continue to address a range of other issues of concern to the alliance. These include the enlargement of the alliance beyond the admission in April 2009 of Albania and Croatia; the future of proposed U.S. and NATO missile defense systems on NATO territory; a possible NATO role in securing energy supplies and infrastructure; the rise of piracy in international waters; and an on-going debate over capabilities, the size of defense budgets, and burden-sharing among the allies. Congress is likely to play an active role in each of these issues, ranging from Senate ratification of proposed enlargements to appropriations decisions on the proposed missile defense system. Congress has also increasingly sought to persuade the European allies to build greater military capabilities for use in combat and stabilization missions in regions of the world where U.S. and European interests are under threat and could likely continue to do so.

The second session of the 111th Congress could play a decisive role in shaping NATO’s response to the aforementioned challenges and events. Congressional action could include hearings and/or legislation on: NATO’s Strategic Concept and the future of the alliance; NATO’s mission in Afghanistan and the refinement of military-led reconstruction efforts; the qualifications of candidate states for allied membership; establishing an improved NATO-EU relationship; and the military capabilities of NATO member states. In addition, the Senate could vote on a revision to the North Atlantic Treaty covering expanded geographic space, should the allies agree to invite Macedonia to join the alliance.

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