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Winning in Afghanistan

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Harlan Ullman - Brussels -- The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been the most successful military alliance in history. But NATO is confronting massive challenges today, in many ways more perplexing and explosive than during the Cold War, when its existence was credibly justified to its publics by the threat of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union disintegrated long ago. And new threats and dangers to the alliance and its cohesion are neither state actors nor confined to Europe, NATO's traditional area of responsibility.

NATO has bet its future on succeeding in Afghanistan, where, for the first time ever, the alliance is fighting a land war. The European Union has eclipsed NATO as the pre-eminent European structure in European political, social and economic integration. NATO suffers from inter-alliance strains, such as with Turkey and America's global war on terror and intra-alliance tensions over enlargement of member states and missile defense that antagonize Russia. And it must resolve the most profound and testing dilemma of all — maintaining a strong, cohesive military alliance long after the military threat that created it has imploded.

Throughout its nearly 60 years of life, NATO has always been at one dramatic crossroad or another. Some argue that NATO has outlived its usefulness, as war between major European powers thankfully is nonexistent. Instead of the border between East and West Germany serving as the main battle line, Afghanistan is now NATO's center of gravity and Achilles' heel.

In 2006, NATO took command of the entire International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) for Afghanistan, consisting of about 32,000 personnel. But civil reforms have not taken hold there. Drug production seems impervious to counternarcotics efforts and continues to increase. Corruption reigns. The courts, legal system and police forces have yet to become fully functional. And while NATO has won every battle against the Taliban, the insurgency still grows.

Casualties especially for the Netherlands and Canada have weakened domestic support. Those governments may choose to extend deployments for another year, but beyond that is problematic. Other allies have set "national caveats" on the use of their forces, greatly restricting combat roles and alienating other allies whose militaries bear the brunt of the fighting. Expenses are mounting. The government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai has yet to win control over its own country. And, NATO governments still refuse to deploy the required troop strengths.

The future status of Kosovo, given powerful Russian resentment against independence, challenges NATO. With a total of some 55,000 troops deployed worldwide, member states' militaries are stretched. The NATO Response Force was originally a highly capable force of 25,000 prepared to deploy outside Europe within 60 days for extended periods. Within months, it was clear those numbers could not be sustained. So, last week's meeting of NATO defense

ministers in the Netherlands had no choice but to reduce the response force by as-an-yet-undetermined number. These and other issues attack and erode the integrity of and political support for the alliance.

If NATO is to remain viable, two vital steps are needed now. NATO requires a credible rationale persuasive enough to convince cynical or skeptical publics that the need for the alliance remains critical and possibly even more so than in the past. To achieve this, a new strategic direction must be created. The point of departure is to transition beyond a military alliance to one that deals more broadly and comprehensively with collaborative security.

Neutralizing jihadist extremism, reducing or preventing instability, protecting energy and national infrastructure, preventing proliferation of nasty and dangerous weapons and conducting humanitarian relief and reconstruction are all candidate roles toward which NATO has been moving. However, any change in strategic missions and indeed for altering the very basis for the alliance must be approved by all 26 members, a daunting task at best. That will take time, but action must start now before the internal and external forces impinging on the alliance grow too powerful to keep cohesion and common purpose intact.

Second, NATO cannot lose in Afghanistan. It must deploy the necessary forces requested by the operational commanders. Then it must focus on civil reforms that are barely on life support and require the equivalent of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. That is not NATO's job but without reform the prospects for Afghanistan are dire. Hence, NATO should call for an assessment of the state and status of both reconstruction and security in Afghanistan. Armed with that assessment, NATO can petition the EU or the U.N. to take on this rescue mission. If neither will, then NATO will have to shoulder those responsibilities or face failure.

The reality is that in today's world, NATO has never been more important. Yet, that reality alone will not suffice to keep the alliance vibrant, effective and intact in today's world.
