

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

NATO: An Alliance Past Its Prime

Doug Bandow

April 26, 2012

On May 20, the 2012 NATO Chicago summit will bring together the heads of state from the alliance. The [agenda](#) reads like a rundown of major world events in the past two years: the Arab Spring, the Libyan civil war, the global financial crisis and the war in Afghanistan. It seems no problem is too big for NATO.

Of these topics, the most pressing and headline-grabbing will be the [plan](#) NATO and the United States establish to gradually turn responsibility for security in Afghanistan over to the Afghan national forces. But also of note are the topics—“lessons learned from Libya” and the ["Smart Defense Initiative."](#)—that display the reliance of Europe on the United States for advanced military capabilities. Libya in particular showcased Europe's inability to act without Washington.

The lessons from Libya are twofold, and it is important to keep them in mind as policy makers and pundits in Washington call for the next U.S. intervention, possibly in Syria or Iran. First, the [results](#) so far [have been disappointing](#) for America's latest stab at coercive democratization.

Libya also was a disappointment as a supposed new model for U.S. intervention. In fact, that conflict reinforces the fact that NATO really stands for North America and The Others. Without the United States, the Europeans would be essentially helpless.

A new alliance study underscores Europe's relative ineffectiveness. Reports the *New York Times*:

Despite widespread praise in Western capitals for [NATO's](#) leadership of the air campaign in [Libya](#), a confidential NATO assessment paints a sobering portrait of the alliance's ability to carry out such campaigns without significant support from the United States.

The report concluded that the allies struggled to share crucial target information, lacked specialized planners and analysts, and overly relied on the United States for reconnaissance and refueling aircraft.

This should surprise no one. After all, during the war against Serbia—another nation which had not threatened America or any American ally—Europe was estimated to have a combat effectiveness less than 15 percent that of the U.S. The Europeans had large conscript armies, but outside of Britain and France had very little ability to project power. Later European participation in Afghanistan has been marred by the dozens of national “caveats” limiting participation in combat.

Yet alliance expansion is also on the agenda for the May NATO summit in Chicago. The list of alliance wannabes includes such powerhouses as Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia. Former Soviet republics notable mostly for their tangled and/or troubled relations with Russia—Georgia and Ukraine—are also on the list. All of these nations would be security liabilities, not assets, for America.

As the NATO study demonstrates, should the alliance’s Article 5 commitment get invoked, America would do most of the fighting. It would be one thing to take that risk where vital interests were at stake. But they are not in the Balkans, let alone in the Caucasus, which was part of Imperial Russia even before the Soviet Union.

Alliances should reflect the security environment. The Cold War is over. The Europeans have developed, the Soviet Union is kaput, and the potential European conflicts of the future—distant and unlikely—are linked to no hegemonic threat against America.

Instead of talking about NATO expansion, the United States should set down the burden of defending Europe. Let the Europeans take over NATO or create their own European defense organization, as they have discussed for years. The latest reminder of Europe’s relative military ineffectiveness reinforces the case for ending the Continent’s cheap ride. It is time to turn North America and The Others into simply The Others.