

NATO Comes to Chicago

NATO's summit this weekend in the Windy City will produce a lot of hot air, but what the aging alliance really needs is a douse in cold water.

Ed Krayewski | May 18, 2012

The NATO summit set to start Sunday in Chicago will be the first such gathering in the United States since the alliance met in Washington for its 50th anniversary in 1999. Atop the agenda this weekend will be Afghanistan, where America is embroiled in its eleventh year of war. Lip service to austerity, in the form of “[smart defense](#)” and “[burden sharing](#),” will also be given at the summit, which is expected to cost the city of Chicago about \$55 million (but don't worry, the federal government will [likely](#) be footing a good portion of the bill, as it often does for much of NATO's business). The alliance will look outside the North Atlantic region to build “[partnerships](#)” that would facilitate future missions, using the template of NATO's intervention in Libya last year, which was requested by the Arab League, as NATO's boosters are wont to repeat.

Topics that won't be broached include the structural [dependency](#) on foreign intervention that NATO is fostering in Afghanistan thanks to its decade-plus involvement in that country's even longer internal strife. Don't expect to hear anything about the [consequences](#) arising from NATO's Libya intervention either.

NATO was formed in the aftermath of World War II as a mutual defense alliance for Western European and North American countries. Forty short years later, the Cold War ended, and with it so did much of NATO's *raison d'être*. Yet NATO soldiered on, inserting itself into the breakup of Yugoslavia, which culminated in the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo. “Remember how controversial that was as an ‘out of area’ operation?” American University's School of International Service dean James Goldgeier asked reporters at a [press preview](#) on Tuesday. Even Human Rights Watch's [report](#) that NATO air strikes in Libya killed 72 civilians last year (at least a third of them under the age of 18) was interpreted as a sign of progress for the

alliance. Ambassador James Dobbins, director of the RAND Institute's Defense Policy Center, characterized HRW's figure as "remarkably low," saying NATO leaders would "probably be congratulating themselves on having less collateral damage than any such effort in world history" if the number held up to scrutiny.

While last year's Libya mission will still be useful for NATO as a model for future "humanitarian interventions" that fall outside the organization's stated mission of "mutual defense," NATO's defining mission so far in the 21st century remains the war in Afghanistan. Yet as Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer (ret.), of the Center for Advanced Defense Studies, told me, "We won the war in 2001. With 500 Americans in three months, the war in Afghanistan was won." Returning to that kind of limited, special operations war, Shaffer says, is what NATO ought to be considering this weekend. But don't count on it.

Instead, NATO leaders will be hammering out details of an Afghan drawdown, which might sound like welcome news at first, but "drawdown" in the sense NATO leaders use the term doesn't mean an end to Western intervention. Far from it. The United States has already **arranged** a bilateral agreement with the Karzai government in Afghanistan on a U.S. presence beyond 2014, and NATO will **remain** involved in nation-building in order to ensure "stability" past the 2014 date. However, as CATO foreign policy analyst Malou Innocent pointed out to me, "this is a region that has been incredibly unstable over the last 40 years. To think we can make it stable in 18 months is a pipe dream."

And on top of the problem of history is the problem of financing. Innocent **has crunched** the numbers: The cost of training the 230,000 to 350,000 Afghan personnel needed to transfer security responsibility from NATO to Afghanistan's civilian government could run up to \$6 billion a year. The Afghan government only collects \$2 billion a year. And there's no guarantee Afghanistan's civilian government will last once U.S. combat troops are out. "Karzai's not going to survive, we might as well accept that," Shaffer says. But in fact the United States and NATO have not accepted it. Instead, they've pinned their drawdown and transition plans on the survival of the Karzai government.

Unfortunately, most of these uncomfortable details will go unmentioned at the NATO summit this weekend, which Senate Foreign Relations European Affairs Subcommittee Chair Jeanne Shaheen says will provide an opportunity to "reaffirm the importance of NATO" and "recognize its continuing influence around the globe." Said Shaheen to reporters on Tuesday: "NATO has been the most successful military and security alliance in modern history, and it

continues to have that role, and for those who question whether it's still functional, whether we continue to have interests in our transatlantic partnership with Europe; I think [this summit is] an opportunity to reaffirm and reconfirm those important relationships." The fact that NATO is **losing** the war in Afghanistan, or that NATO's mission in Libya had the alliance acting as the de facto air force for the Libyan rebels, doesn't jive with the positive image NATO will be trying to project to the world from Chicago.

As for the weekend's wildcards, they include the participation of Pakistan's president as well as the demonstrations expected outside. President Asif Ali Zardari was invited to the NATO summit only in the last week, **likely** after the Pakistani government indicated it would lift its blockade of supplies headed to NATO troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan's intelligence service remains one of the Taliban's most powerful **patrons**, while the Pakistani government has often been left out of the West's discussions on Afghanistan. That, Shaffer told me, was a mistake. "Pakistanis should've been key contributors from day one in whatever happens in Afghanistan. They're going to look at this as an insult."

Meanwhile, protesters are coming from as far as **Portland** and cops are coming from as far as **Philadelphia** to meet them. And although the G-8 Summit was initially planned to immediately precede the NATO Summit in Chicago, the G-8 gathering was **moved** to Camp David at the last minute. Which raises the question of why both summits weren't just scheduled for Camp David in the first place, thus sparing Chicago residents of the security-related hassles they're bound to face. But then again, if Chicago wasn't playing host to NATO, the city wouldn't be able to "highlight its economic vitality, its arts and architecture, and its can-do spirit," as Chicago's **NATO Host Committee** boasts. Who cares about **shutting down** half of a metropolis when the city government's can-do reputation is at stake?

Ed Krayewski is an associate editor of 24/7 News at Reason.com.