FORUM

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     the official view of the Assembly.

1.   Over 70 parliamentarians from 19 NATO member states, along with several legislators from associate countries, held their 5th Parliamentary Transatlantic Forum at the National Defense University (NDU) in Washington DC on December 5 and 6. The meeting, co-organised by the NATO PA, the Atlantic Council of the United States and NDU, confirmed to be a very important event for European legislators to understand the policies of the US government and discuss the state of transatlantic relations.

2.   Four years after 9/11 it is clear that the terrorist attacks on the United States represented a dramatic and permanent change in terms of the American people's perception of the world. As a consequence, the "global war on terror" and the spread of democracy in the Middle East have come to define the presidency of George W Bush, now in his fifth year in the White House. Despite increasing domestic criticism of the administration's conduct in Iraq, there is still a fairly broad consensus in the United States on the fact that the ambitious project of bringing democracy to Arab-Muslim countries in the broader Middle East - seen as crucial to win the war on terrorism - has come to define US foreign policy.

3.   All US speakers, from both the administration and Washington think-tanks, indicated that a majority in the United States was convinced that the spread of democracy was a necessary enterprise, because truly democratic countries do not sponsor or produce terrorism and tend to be reluctant to wage war. Differences, however, appeared to be quite sharp on the tactics to fight terrorism and on how aggressively pursuing the democratization of the Arab Muslim world. Participants from Europe clarified that, although their countries subscribed to the project of bringing democracy to the broader Middle East, there was a distinction between the two sides of the Atlantic in terms of the respect of legality and civil liberties, as the recent disagreements on the CIA renditions of prisoners had demonstrated. One speaker from the US added that the perception around the world that some in Washington were supporting illegal procedures was already undermining the US credibility with regard to the spread of democracy. It was "appalling", he said, that members of the Bush administration were openly "negotiating with the Congress on the use of torture". Other participants contended that Europeans were more inclined to strengthen democratic institutions in the region through dialogue and cooperation, using tools such as the now 10-year old EU Barcelona process, in which context a code of conduct against terrorism had recently been approved, or NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

4.   US discussants recognised that the war on terrorism could not be won only by military means. One of them even warned against "over-militarising" the issue, because "responding militarily to the terrorist threat is more often than not going to backfire". Responses to terrorism, he added, should be overwhelmingly based on intelligence and law enforcement, with the addition of some targeted use of special forces. Another discussant stressed the need to invest more in human intelligence, the lack of which had been one of the major reasons for the intelligence failures leading to 9/11.

5.   One administration official divided terrorist groups into four distinct baskets: (1) Anarchists, executing violence for their personal goals; (2) State-sponsored; (3) Westphalian terrorists, probably the largest group, including insurgents, secessionists seeking political change; and (4) Caliphatists, inspired by the radical Islamist "vision" of re-establishing a Caliphate that would reunite all Muslims. He admitted that boundaries between the last two categories were permeable, and indicated for instance that groups such as Hezbollah, typically belonging to the fourth group, could eventually become Westphalian. The advantage of this was that "all the Westphalian terrorists can be appeased tomorrow", whereas the Caliphatists could never be appeased and are therefore the most dangerous. Muslim participants in the audience objected to this classification, seen as an oversimplification of a complex issue. The Caliphate "vision", they said, is often utilised as an excuse by terrorists with a political agenda who used the Islamic rhetoric in order to appeal to people in the Arab Muslim world.

6.   The still unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict was indicated by many European participants as another major driver for instability and terrorism in the Middle East. Some US speakers

disagreed, believing that the long-overdue resolution of that conflict would certainly ease tensions in the region, but would not stop terrorism. Some positive signals were highlighted, following the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza strip last August. In particular, some mentioned the positive role played by the United States and the European Union together with regard to the recent opening of the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. This, it was said, demonstrated the need for a concerted transatlantic effort to bring the peace process to a successful conclusion.

7.   Palestinian presidential elections in 2005 had sent a positive signal and everybody was looking forward to the legislative elections scheduled for 25 January 2006 to confirm the democratic progress of the PA. One US speaker expressed concern, however, about the risk of Hamas making a good score in the elections in January. Another US analyst warned against integrating terrorist groups that also had a "political branch", such as Hamas and Hezbollah, into the democratic process, as "it could backfire". Some Europeans disagreed, believing that bringing Hamas into the political process might help mitigate its more radical positions. The example of the Muslim Brotherhood in countries like Jordan or Egypt was cited by some as an example of a radical organisation which was able to transform and integrate in the democratic process of those countries.

8.   A degree of transatlantic consensus emerged on the need to tackle the root causes of terrorism. There was, however, some disagreement among participants about whether poverty should be seen as a generating factor for terrorism. US discussants excluded it categorically, whereas other participants from allied countries were more nuanced. Poverty might not be a direct cause, they contended, but certainly when associated with desperation and absence of political perspectives would provide "fertile soil" for terrorist groups to thrive. The example of the situation of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza was cited in this regard. One US speaker disagreed: the root causes, he insisted, were in the political culture of the Middle East, where leaders based their power on force and corruption rather than on legitimate democratic institutions and the rule-of-law. Also, another US discussant declared that these regimes in the Arab Muslim world were reluctant to take a clear stance against terrorism.

9.   The situation in the Middle East, most US speakers said, justified the Bush strategy of bringing democracy to the region. But, others asked, was it going to work? According to a more sceptical view something in the culture of the region seemed to prevent it. Others expressed a more optimistic view and indicated, as an example, that in the aftermath of World War II analysts were sceptical about bringing democracy to Japan. Some European legislators doubted that Western-style democracy could be imposed to the Muslim world, certainly not by force or political diktat, and questioned the "messianic" tone of American neo-conservatives who had helped shaping the "Bush Doctrine". Arab countries, they contended, should be encouraged to find their own brand of democracy, adapted to their traditions and culture. US discussants were more inclined to think that democracy was a universal value and it was only a question of time for it to spread around the Middle East.

10.   The war in Iraq, in the opinion of one US discussant, was precisely intended to "kick-start democracy in the Middle East" and had "changed 50 years of US policy in the Middle East". The same speaker admitted that by imposing democracy with military means the Bush administration had also perhaps "opened a Pandora's box". Many Europeans stressed that the presence of US troops in Iraq had greatly contributed to the rise of Islamist radicalism and terrorism in the whole region, and neighbouring countries friends of the West, such as Jordan, were paying a very high price for this. There was also general agreement that the reconstruction phase in Iraq had not been planned carefully enough and the US administration had made several mistakes. However, the overall question "are we better off today?" remained basically unanswered.

11.   With regard to the future of Iraq, one speaker indicated that three views were now shaping up in the United States: (1) The United States had done what it could but now its troops were part of the problem, therefore they should be withdrawn as quick as possible; (2) An immediate withdrawal was counterproductive, but troops should be re-deployed gradually; (3) Any clear deadline for

withdrawal is dangerous, troops should remain, as President Bush said, "until victory". Many discussants suggested that an increased role of the Iraqi security forces was crucial to stabilize the country. This, however, according to administration officials, would take a few more years.

12.   Participants also learned that, in order not to repeat the same mistakes made in the reconstruction of Iraq, the US administration was coming up with a more coherent policy to deal with post-conflict situation. The Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization has recently been created in the Department of State to lead and coordinate US government civilian capacity to prevent or prepare for post-conflict situations, and help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict so they can find their way toward democracy and stability. This office, among other things, would coordinate with international partners, such as NATO, the EU and the UN, to deliver "effective multilateral responses".

13.   Most US speakers recognised that the Iraq war had created a major transatlantic rift, but many (including Europeans) agreed that now relations had improved, thanks also to a "change of tone" in the White House from the beginning of President Bush's second term. The relationship with the Allies, and the NATO missions in the broader Middle East (Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Afghanistan, partnerships in Central Asia), were indicated by one administration official as crucial: "we are partners in world security" he said. But this partnership should be enlarged, not only to the broader Middle East but increasingly to countries in Asia and the Far East. Some Europeans were sceptical about the utility of embracing non-democratic regimes in Central Asia.

14.   Iran was unanimously indicated as a major threat for the Alliance. No participant doubted that the real intention of the regime in Tehran was to acquire nuclear weapons capability. Although some saw it as an inevitable outcome, others seemed to indicate that there was still a chance to reverse the country's drive towards actually acquiring nuclear weapons. Some participants underscored the Iranian quest for regional power status partly as a result of Western - and particularly US- "double standards", represented by the tacit acceptance of the Israeli nuclear programme. Suggestions to treat Iran's case similarly to the Libyan one were deemed not appropriate by one US participant. General support was nonetheless expressed by US speakers for the European diplomatic efforts towards Tehran and the role of the IAEA, although there was not much optimism about their success. The military option was not completely ruled out by US discussants but considered extremely unlikely.

15.   The ambivalent role of Russia was mentioned with regard to Iran, as well as in other contexts. Whether Moscow was going to become a real partner of the West or remain a "reluctant" one would depend, according to one speaker, on its successful transition to a real democracy. At the moment, Russia was still perceived as fuelling instability in strategically important regions such as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, because some in Moscow saw the relationship with the West in these areas as a "zero sum game". The ambiguous role of Russia was also demonstrated, according to one US speaker, by its attitude towards the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. The West, he suggested, should be more aggressive in supporting a democratic change in that country.

16.   The rising role of China as a "stakeholder" in international relations was also stressed. It was not yet clear, however, whether Beijing was going to be a rival or a partner of the West. According to US officials, much will depend on the US-EU joint approach to it. Unfortunately, one speaker said, the issue is still "absent from the strategic debate between the US and Europe", as the querelle over the EU arms embargo demonstrated. Beijing also presented a serious problem to the Allies because of its human rights record and largely insufficient level democratisation. If China became really democratic, however, its contribution to global stability would be significant, otherwise, according to one discussant, there might be very dangerous consequences.

17.   All these issues were indicated by many discussants as profoundly affecting the transatlantic relationship and the role of NATO in the years to come. As the United States is engaged globally in a struggle to fight terrorism and spread stability through democratisation, NATO missions are also on the increase and spanning a much wider geographical area. All allies, therefore, have an

interest in making sure that, in the words of US Senator John McCain, "NATO does not become a hollow alliance". According to one contributor, although Americans and Europeans do not always agree on political strategies in the Middle East, "they have a compelling reason to reach an accord on the need to strengthen NATO military forces for future operations in that region and elsewhere". Many participants agreed that if adequate capabilities were lacking, the Alliance would "not be able to act even when its political leaders agree on the need to do so". Predictably, US participants insisted that European allies should increase their military budgets, indicating that any efforts which would result in more, and more relevant, European military capabilities were "a net benefit for the US" as much as for the Alliance. Others pointed out that building up European defence capabilities would require a more rational policy in transatlantic defence trade, as well as clearer policies on technology transfer issues. The 2006 NATO Transformation Summit was stressed by many as crucial to address all these issues.

18.   A comprehensive framework to help guide NATO improvements was proposed by one speaker. This would envision increasing capabilities in five areas: special operations forces, the NATO Response Force, high-readiness combat forces, stabilisation and reconstruction forces, and defence sector development assets. The United States would provide one-third of the necessary forces, while Europe would be responsible for the other two-thirds. But Europeans would have to commit only 10 % of their active military manpower, and invest in such affordable assets as information networks, smart munitions, commercial lift, logistics support, and other enablers.

19.   Discussions on defence capabilities were accompanied by a lengthy debate on the US defence transformation agenda and its implications for the relations with allied and partner countries. One speaker highlighted three major aspects of transformation: strategic, information technology, and conflict spectrum. According to one speaker, the US Quadrennial Defense Review recommended the capabilities and structures needed to execute the US National Defense Strategy approved last March and put a great emphasis on transformation. But it also placed a high priority on working closely with allies to improve their capabilities. But this, replied another contributor, should not be seen in terms of purely technological assets, as many of the capabilities needed were in low-tech areas such as basic communication, control and command, or training and education. Also, the US and its allies should accept that they will never see things completely in the same way, therefore there was a need to "work where overlap of interests was found". For Europe, it was not so much a question of spending more on military capabilities as it was of "better marshalling continental resources".

20.   Alliance transformation was also discussed with regard to NATO's new role in the area of civil emergency and natural disasters consequence management. With NATO Response Force troops deployed in Pakistan following a major earthquake and to help the United States after hurricane Katrina, some suggestions were made with a view to improving NATO's effectiveness: (1) expanding North Atlantic Council meetings ad hoc to include partner ministers dealing with disaster management; (2) involve the NATO Science department in developing consequence management technologies; and (3) use NATO Trust Funds to boost the capacity of local communities in partner countries to deal with natural disasters. It was important, however, that the leadership in such operations remained in the hands of civilians.

21.   Developing such capabilities would also greatly enhance NATO's potential role in responding to terrorist attacks involving Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons. With regard to this area, one US official indicated that multiple, simultaneous terrorist attacks involving CBRN were considered by the United States as an "immediate and likely danger". And as consequence management following such an attack would almost necessarily involve allied countries, NATO should continue to prepare for this and strengthen such units as the CBRN battalion created in 2004.

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