CARNEGIE EUROPE

FROM SUEZ TO SYRIA:
WHY NATO MUST STRENGTHEN ITS POLITICAL ROLE

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NATO is a political organization. More than ever before, defense, security, and politics are intertwined. The alliance needs to recognize this—and does not have the luxury of time. Apart from a weakened EU, NATO faces a multitude of challenges along its Eastern and Southern flanks, in addition to terrorism and cyberattacks, energy insecurity, disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening the West, and the uncertainty of the U.S. stance following the 2016 presidential election. NATO must rise to the challenge of putting in place long-term mechanisms to protect the Euro-Atlantic community's way of life, shared values, and security.

What is at Stake

- New asymmetrical threats have accumulated. They have the potential to inflict irreparable damage on a transatlantic relationship that is already under immense strain. Allies have no common perception of threats.

- The rise of populist and anti-American movements across Europe, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Syria and disinformation campaigns against the West, and uncertainty following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president make the alliance vulnerable.

- The changing nature of the threats facing the alliance and the shifting requirements of defense and security call for an overhaul of the ways NATO reacts to crises—militarily and, especially, politically.

Recommendations for NATO

- **Reinforce the alliance's political dimension.** This is more essential than ever because of the complex challenges to the West's political, security, and democratic systems—not only from Russia and the self-proclaimed Islamic State but also from the darker sides of globalization and technology, including cyberattacks. This means using the North Atlantic Council, which brings together alliance ambassadors on a weekly basis, as a regular, candid forum to discuss political issues.

- **Take resilience seriously.** Terrorist attacks, whether conventional, in cyberspace, or hybrid, damage citizens' confidence and trust in governments. NATO and governments must be able to rebuild societies quickly in the event of major attacks that could disrupt essential infrastructure. Resilience is about defending the Western liberal order. NATO's role is crucial in this regard, provided it has the military capabilities to respond quickly to attacks.

- **Forge political bonds with the EU.** There is no time, value, or ideological advantage for NATO and the EU to compete with each other. NATO's relations with the EU are vital for strengthening the political aspects of the transatlantic relationship. The compartmentalization of military and civilian tasks is redundant.

- **Take the alliance out of its bubble.** NATO officials should leave their Brussels headquarters and travel to town halls, schools, colleges, and enterprises to explain what the alliance is about and why it is needed.

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