

Opening Remarks of Chairman Lantos at hearing, “The Future of NATO: How Valuable an Asset?”

The Committee will come to order.

NATO was the great military alliance of the 20th Century. The question before the committee today is whether it will retain this distinction in the 21st century.

For decades NATO was the powerful military defensive line against the ambitions of the Soviet Union, a show of Western solidarity against the totalitarianism and depredations of the Communist East, and a tripwire for the use nuclear weapons by the United States.

Without NATO, tanks could have rolled from Moscow to the Mediterranean or to the Atlantic. Today, had there been no NATO would be discussing the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belgium or the Soviet Socialist Republic of Portugal.

Not only did NATO prevent a European red tide, but it has actually reclaimed much of the Soviet bloc. NATO's founders 58 years ago never could have dreamed that some of the alliance's most stalwart and enthusiastic members in 2007 would be those same Central and Eastern European nations the Soviets had dominated and occupied, and that the alliance would have grown organically from 12 members to 26.

But for all its success, NATO was never actually tested in battle – a true blessing given the devastating consequences of a possible thermonuclear conflict. Now, in the early 21st Century, the world has thrust an entirely new identity upon NATO – one that many of its members seem reluctant in the extreme to assume. The alliance is involved in its first real combat in the mountains of Afghanistan, a real shooting war.

While soldiers of some NATO countries are fighting and dying in Afghanistan, many more countries are doing little more than hunkering down in their secure bases, marking time while their brothers and sisters-in-arms confront the real battle. But some European governments ought to wake up and realize that the moment of truth is at hand for the entire enterprise of NATO.

NATO and its member nations face a stark choice: the alliance could evolve into a reliable global military alliance, halting terrorism and rogue regimes that threaten both Europe and the United States and democracies everywhere. Or it could devolve into an agglomeration of governments that are only rhetorically committed to the common defense, a coalition of the partially or feebly willing, whose individual nations may or may not tackle the security challenges of a post-9/11 planet. The grand NATO alliance, once a bright light for freedom and democracy, either will flicker and then fade into the dark night or it will shine brighter than ever.

The results in Afghanistan are an early indicator of which road NATO will take. NATO's efforts there since 2001 demonstrate that the U.S. and the Europeans are willing to conduct tough combat operations – and do so in a country outside of Europe.

But the treadmill in Afghanistan is going faster and faster under our feet, demanding more and more of every country's efforts. The Taliban is back, and is organized, and it is bearing down on the southern part of the country. To allow a resurgence of the Taliban would be to allow a state-sponsored launching pad for terror and a state sponsor of narco-trafficking. The twin threat of a terror state and a narco state – wrapped into one – would be disastrous for the people of Afghanistan, for the fight against terror, and for the entire world. But it would also be a devastating blow to the future of NATO because it would represent the failure of NATO's most ambitious mission since its founding in 1949.

We will not let Afghanistan fail. But the question is whether the United States will prevent its failure with only some some of our allies or with the full concert with all NATO members. Europe must be our full partner in this mission if NATO is to be redeemed.

So far, European nations have only partially fulfilled their part of the bargain. Dutch, British, Danish, and Canadian troops have been among the most brave, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. troops fighting the Taliban daily. But we need German and French and other European troops – whose grandparents we freed from Nazi tyranny in World War II – to fight on the frontlines too. Mothers in Nebraska and New Jersey are no more eager to have their sons die in Kabul than mothers in Berlin and Bordeaux. If NATO had a more robust commitment in Afghanistan, the Taliban would be defeated in a short time, particularly if the civilian infrastructure would move along as capably as NATO is.

That brings me to the future of NATO after Afghanistan. If NATO is to be revitalized, its member nations must come to grips with the expanding definition of the term “invaded,” whereby terror groups can invade a country without a standing army. It must come to grips with the expanding geographic reach of dangerous countries developing weapons of mass destruction, like Iran, the greatest planetary threat today. NATO and its member nations must define what role the alliance is able, or willing, to perform in military conflicts outside of the relatively peaceful confines of Europe.

We should consider seriously NATO's own expansion beyond the borders of Europe and North Africa. Why not allow firmly democratic nations, such as South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and Israel, to

join the world's greatest military alliance? Their interests and their ideals are joined with ours. When the North Atlantic Treaty was signed here in Washington in April of 1949, its founder and the great Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson marked out the crucial condition of NATO that echoes forcefully today. And I quote - "This Treaty, though born of fear and frustration, must lead to positive social, economic, and political achievements if it is to live." Indeed, if NATO is to live, if we are to rejuvenate it, if it is to fulfill its promise in this century, all its partners must be committed steadfastly to the social and economic, and political principles this great democratic military alliance symbolizes. I now turn to my distinguished colleague, the ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, to make any remarks she wishes to at this time.