

## Consultation on the review of NATO's Strategic Concept

### Ian Davis

NATO has come under criticism from a variety of sources, including [myself](#), over its lack of transparency and accountability procedures. However, new Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has made a promising start to his reign by opening up the review of NATO's Strategic Concept to the public, albeit in a limited and tightly managed fashion.

On 3 August, NATO launched a [web module](#) on its new Strategic Concept with a video introduction by Rasmussen. In addition to providing access to background information, related opinions and an extensive bibliography, the website also includes a public discussion forum, with a promise that:

Comments posted on this Discussion Forum will be periodically transmitted to both the Secretary General and the group of eminent persons as an input to their deliberations. NATO will give feedback as appropriate.

In his first [press conference](#), the new Secretary General—among a list of priorities that included assistance to Afghanistan, NATO-Russia relations, cooperation with Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative countries, and the situation in Kosovo—also placed a strong emphasis on public consultation in the process towards a new Strategic Concept:

It should be by far the most open and the most inclusive process of policy development NATO has ever conducted.... I want to hear the views of the public on what NATO should be and do in future... I will also conduct town halls in as many NATO countries as I can, to hear from all walks of life. And I want to assure everyone who shares their views with us that they will be heard.

The real driving force behind the review, however, is the 12-person [Expert Group](#) appointed by the Secretary General and chaired by Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State. The Expert Group represents a "broad spectrum of large and small NATO members and offers a balanced combination of insiders and outsiders, including from the private sector, think tanks and the academic community". The Group is tasked with consulting as widely as possible, in NATO and far beyond, with governments, think tanks, NGOs and other international organisations. The Group will then submit its conclusions to the Secretary General (in April 2010) and he will then lead the final phase of negotiations with member nations. If all goes well, a new Strategic Concept will be agreed at the next NATO Summit in Portugal in late 2010.

This commitment to undertake a widespread and complex multinational and multi-level consultation is to be welcomed. But the proof of the pudding, of course, will be in the eating. Key 'known-unknown' ingredients at this stage include the quality, size and coherence of the public contribution to the process and the extent to which these views are reflected in the final document. In regard to the former, **I would urge anyone who has ever questioned any aspect of NATO policy—from the intervention in Afghanistan to NATO nuclear policy—to**

**post a comment on the NATO Discussion Forum.** (If you are short of ideas, a progressive reform agenda for NATO can be found [here](#)). Otherwise NATO is likely to conclude that citizens care little about these issues (a view that is already fairly widespread among many officials) and the exercise in engagement is unlikely to be repeated or developed further.

Whether the public contributions end up on the cutting room floor or genuinely help to shape the final document will be even more difficult to fathom, although it is in NATO's interest to make this as transparent as possible. NATO also needs to be cut a little slack given that the Expert Group faces a difficult balancing act in reflecting the views of such a diverse array of stakeholders. Having said that, there remain legitimate grounds for concern. In particular, NATO needs to loosen its access to information rules so that the public can make as informed contributions as the Expert Group. Too many of the significant background studies, such as the advice of the Military Committee, remain off-limits to the public.

Two elements in the "consultation phase" appear particularly crucial: the presentation of the Group of Experts' analysis and recommendations to the Secretary General and Rasmussen's own subsequent report ("based on the experts' analysis and recommendations and Allies' initial reactions"). It will be important for NATO to make these two reports public so that there is room for further debate prior to the final drafting and negotiation phase. Finally, parliamentarians and the media should also exercise greater scrutiny over the process – although the failure of the mainstream media to cover this issue to date and the absence of a single national parliamentary committee dedicated purely to NATO affairs anywhere in the Alliance (leaving aside the separate role of the [NATO Parliamentary Assembly](#)) does not give grounds for optimism.

We know from experience that poor consultation practice wastes people's time and can seriously undermine the public's trust in government. To access true public opinion about such a high stakes issue as NATO's Strategic Concept, the public consultation could have been clearer, more integrated into the overall process, more independent, and conducted over a longer time-frame. Nonetheless, the new Secretary General has cast the door ajar. It is now up to concerned citizens to walk through it.

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**Notes:**

1. NATO's Strategic Concept is its core mission statement, and the current 1999 version predates the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the sending of NATO forces to Afghanistan. The 60th Anniversary NATO Summit held in Strasbourg/Kehl in April this year launched the process that will lead to a new NATO Strategic Concept. The Guiding Principles for the process call for:

*an inclusive and participatory approach* from the biggest to the smallest Ally. Moreover, the process should engage Partners in

the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative as well as partners across the globe. Furthermore, the process should be *transparent* and engage other key international actors such as the EU and UN as well as other types of NATO interlocutors, like NGOs. Finally, an interactive dialogue with the broader public is encouraged.

2. NATO Watch is a new, independent project that collects and disseminates information and research on NATO and Euro-Atlantic security issues. It is the only independent NGO with a remit to monitor and analyse NATO on a daily basis. A web-based information portal [www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org) will be launched in the autumn to provide comprehensive, accurate, reliable and up-to-date information about NATO.