



European Missile Defense: Looking at the Heart and Soul of the U.S.-European Alliance

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

The recently concluded negotiations for placing an anti-ballistic missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic underscore a truism of the post-Cold War transatlantic relationship: Americans and Europeans often do not see the world the same way, yet this does not prevent cooperation on sensitive issues even if such cooperation is strongly disliked by many, or even most, Europeans. The Europeans may not (yet) fear mullahs armed with nukes, but their leaders do not want to confront the world without the United States. The saga of missile defense is a window into the frustrating but still essential transatlantic alliance.

When the Bush administration began exploratory talks in 2002 with Poland and the Czech Republic about placing an anti-rogue state missile defense system in Central Europe, few people paid much attention, and those who did were mostly hostile. Former French president Jacques Chirac may have been *sans pareil* in his vehement arguments against a missile shield,¹ but his reservations were echoed loudly in Germany and Holland and more quietly in the hallways of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).² Popular support for the antiballistic system, which would put ten interceptors in Poland and a radar installation in the Czech Republic, has never been high in Europe even though concern about Iran's nuclear program has markedly increased since Germany, France, and Great Britain—the “EU-3”—began negotiations with Tehran over uranium enrichment in October 2003.³

European sentiments about this system have, if anything, gotten worse as the Iranian clerical regime has refused the EU-3 commercial “carrots” and resisted United Nations-imposed, European-backed sanction “sticks.” In the spring of 2008, a

poll conducted by the *International Herald Tribune* and the news channel France 24 found that, in Germany, 71 percent were against while 19 percent supported missile defense; in Spain, the numbers were 61 against, 19 in favor; and in France, 58 percent were opposed, and 22 percent in favor.⁴ In June 2008—one month before the staunchly pro-Atlanticist government of Czech prime minister Mirek Topolánek signed the deal with Washington—a poll showed 68 percent of Czechs opposed to the radar installation and only 24 percent in favor.⁵ Prague and other Czech cities have regularly seen demonstrations against the planned radar base, and an alliance of mayors has formed to build a grass-roots movement to defeat the deal in parliament when it comes up for a vote sometime before January 2009.⁶

The Czech Republic

The Topolánek administration's determination to move forward with the radar is particularly striking since Czech regional elections, which took place in October 2008, are critical to the government's political health. By backing the unpopular accord, the government has risked a rebellion within its governing coalition since the winners regionally will essentially be in control of the politically

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important disbursement of the EU money throughout the country. Because EU largesse to the Czech Republic is billions of euros per year,⁷ this is a critical matter to the ruling coalition's base. In the October vote, the opposition Social Democratic Party made enormous gains, winning all thirteen regions contested.⁸ In 2004, Topolánek's Civic Democratic Party (CDP) won twelve regions. Although some prominent Social Democrats have in the past backed the deployment of the missile defense radar, the party has now become hostile to the plan. The CDP is also in jeopardy of losing control of the Czech Senate. The first round of balloting for a third of the upper house coincided with the regional elections, and the results, which currently favor the Social Democrats, could shake Topolánek's parliamentary dominance.⁹ Without CDP control of the upper chamber, the missile defense vote is in serious jeopardy. Senior CDP officials risk political oblivion should they lose the missile defense vote in parliament and see the government itself fall.

Nevertheless, the Czechs were much less difficult and less financially demanding in negotiations with the United States than the Poles, in part because senior Czech officials saw the missile defense deal as a cornerstone of Europe's post-Cold War defense pact with Washington. In short, the Topolánek government believes the vote is critical to maintaining a close relationship with the United States, the only real guarantor of Czech national security.¹⁰

But it is important to note that the Topolánek government has not been particularly straightforward in how it has tried to sell missile defense to the Czechs. When the foreign ministry orchestrated a large conference in May 2008 in Prague to build popular and parliamentary support for the radar installation, official speakers and most of the guests did not dwell on the threat that a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic could pose to Europe—even though senior Czech officials can be very direct in describing the nefarious nature of Tehran. The emphasis was on NATO and how the missile defense system would reinforce NATO's and Europe's defensive depth.¹¹ The Topolánek administration, even though it is one of the most pro-American governments in Europe, does not often stress Czech-U.S. bilateral military ties because it is unpopular to do so. But the Czechs, both in the government and the opposition, privately are quick to say that NATO is meaningless without the United States being front and center.

"There isn't a single Czech who believes that France, Germany, and Great Britain could save us from Russia," remarked one Czech official who is frustrated by his own countrymen's growing anti-Americanism.¹²

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The mind-set and tactics have been different in Poland. In Warsaw, senior Polish officials did not see—at least before the Russian invasion of Georgia—European missile defense as essential to their security. Before U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski, a former colleague at AEI, signed the missile defense deal on August 20, 2008, Polish officials publicly and privately regularly downplayed the Iranian nuclear threat, suggesting 2015 as the *earliest* possible date that

the Iranians might be able to develop both a Europe-menacing long-range missile and a nuclear warhead.¹³ Not infrequently, Sikorski remarked, "We feel no threat from Iran."¹⁴ In the words of Polish prime minister Donald Tusk, who, after his election, wanted to stop his country's participation in the missile shield but was persuaded not to do so by the foreign ministry: "We are not in a rush to conclude the deal. We are looking for good terms."¹⁵

A constant theme in the Polish position has been the belief that any agreement concluded under heavy American pressure or that failed to address Polish demands for both more general military assistance and a new air defense system directed explicitly at the Russians would irreparably harm U.S.-Polish relations since the prickly, nationalist Polish parliament would veto such a deal.¹⁶ And parliamentary approval is required for the installation of the interceptors in Poland. Where the Czechs would occasionally grumble about American negotiating style, tactics, and frustrating bureaucratic politics in Washington, the Poles could become indignant. Although Pentagon and State Department officials would suggest that the Tusk government had become too overtly utilitarian in seeking a direct quid pro quo for its efforts, the Polish position *was* more complicated.

Warsaw certainly knew it had Washington in a tight spot. Failing in Poland could have sent a ripple effect south to Prague, where the margin of victory in the parliament still remained thin. And Warsaw was financially

aggressive and not particularly logical in its requests for military assistance. Deploying Patriot missile batteries in Poland—the core demand in negotiations with the United States—designed to counter Russian threats is both expensive and ineffective: it is the NATO—actually, the American—security guarantee to Warsaw that is the only reliable counter to Russia, a point that Polish officials, at least in private, have usually been quick to confess. Senior Polish officials would regularly say that the United States needed to do more to convince the Russians that the anti-Iran defense system did not threaten Moscow’s nuclear missiles aimed at Europe and the United States.¹⁷ Yet they wanted to have a Patriot or a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense capability in Poland that would counter Russia’s ability to threaten Poland and the rest of Europe with intermediate-range missiles.¹⁸ This contradiction was obvious to the Americans but did not seem to trouble Warsaw.¹⁹

Challenges

Although the Czechs have been less difficult to deal with than the Poles, the reality is that Czech support for closer cooperation with the United States is on thinner ice. The “Europeanization” of the Czech Republic has, like its post-Communist economy, grown quickly. Its relationship with America has always been a bit of an anomaly. The anti-Communist dissident and playwright Václav Havel, who became Czechoslovakia’s first post-Soviet president, is one of the few great post-Cold War, pro-American European intellectuals. A small number of men and women try to advance his legacy inside and outside the government. Without them, the Bush administration would probably have no chance of convincing the Czech parliament to accept the radar installation. The dominant mind-set in the country, which Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin’s aggressiveness has probably only dented, is strong diffidence about, if not hostility toward, anything military, especially if it puts Czechs on the front line. *The Good Soldier Schweik*, a classic of Czech literature extolling the virtues of pacifism, has melded well with Western Europe’s post-Cold War image as a beacon of unrelenting diplomacy and low defense budgets. As Jiri Schneider, the program director at the Prague Security Studies Institute, put it, “The missile defense plan has

sparked a national debate about how exposed we want to be on the international stage.”²⁰

Unlike the Czechs, who want as few American troops at the radar base as possible, senior Polish officials have often given the impression that all they *really* want is a large American military base in Poland.²¹ In Polish eyes, a significant deployment of U.S. troops on Polish soil would make Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty—which says that an attack on one member is an attack on all—real.²² Warsaw is sensitive about being left alone in time of war—an understandable sentiment given past and recent history. As Tusk colorfully put it, “it’s no good when assistance comes to dead people. Poland wants to be in alliances where assistance comes in the very first hours of—knock on wood—any possible conflict.”²³

But basing U.S. soldiers in Poland was not an option for the Bush administration, which has never wanted to confront Putin’s Russia forcefully. A recurring theme of the Bush administration is the belief that Americans and Russians have—or ought to have—common interests, chief among them stopping Iran from going nuclear. Even though Russia has consistently blocked the UN from implementing tough sanctions against Tehran, even though Moscow has continued the construction of the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr, and even though Putin has sold the mullahs sophisticated ground-to-air missiles for their nuclear sites, the hope remains that Russia can somehow be brought on board.

Putting a significant U.S. military installation in Poland—say, five thousand troops—would certainly make Moscow indignant. It would clearly signal that its “legitimate” security interests end at the Polish-Russian border. It would, without question, tell the Russians that any military incursion or harassment of Poland would lead to confrontation with the United States. The doubts about Article Five, which intensify as one gets closer to the Russian border and farther from a U.S. military base, would end. What Poland has been asking for—and what the Bush administration and probably much of Western Europe, the bedrock of NATO, have not been willing to give—is an end to the gnawing sense that NATO really has a two-tiered structure in which Westerners are safe because of geography and tighter historical and cultural bonds with the United States and Easterners, when push comes to shove, might just be on their own.

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The Poles have, at least in their own eyes, been jilted. They sent troops to Iraq, filling in for the departing Spanish, seeing it as an opportunity to prove their bona fides as an American ally. Polish soldiers and diplomats are quick to say that the Mesopotamian adventure has been militarily useful but spiritually and economically unsatisfying. Rightly or wrongly, the Poles expected more economic and military assistance for their contribution to Iraq than what former U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld and the Republican-controlled Congress were willing to provide. In Warsaw, among Polish officials who have dealt directly with the Bush administration over Iraq, it is not hard to detect some bitterness about how it all has played out.²⁴ “Poland takes the heat on behalf of freedom and democracy around the world,” Sikorski has remarked, referring implicitly to how Poland sent thousands of soldiers to aid the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, fought and suffered casualties, and is now increasing its contingent in Afghanistan. He has also said:

As a credible partner and ally to the United States, that respect should have practical consequences, which should be paid back in times of genuine crisis. We accept the good will [of] the U.S. agreement over missile defense, but we also expect that the United States will pay attention to the modernization of our armed forces. It is the most important principle of our relations.²⁵

The Polish political elite’s bitterness about Iraq—which is probably more profound than just disappointment with Bush and his incompetence in Mesopotamia—and the flood of money pouring into Poland from the EU have spiritually moved Poland westward toward Brussels. What has happened rapidly in the Czech Republic is happening more slowly in Poland, curbed primarily by Poland’s greater fear of Putin’s Russia and an acute remembrance of things past.

The Bush administration’s European missile defense initiative has been a high-wire act, looking as if it were going to tumble several times in both Poland and the Czech Republic. The Russian invasion of Georgia in August has no doubt changed the dynamic. Although both Polish and American officials say privately that a deal had been worked out before Putin let loose his tanks on August 8, Polish fears of a resurgent, aggressive Russia unquestionably have made any defense agreement that bases some U.S. troops in Polish territory more appealing. In the Czech Republic, the picture is less

clear since the neutralist bent in the country—especially on the Czech left—is profound, and licit and illicit Russian investment in the Czech Republic may have an effect on how some parliamentarians vote on the missile defense pact.²⁶ But the Russian invasion of Georgia did send a shock wave through the Czech political system that may well prove, in combination with Poland’s signed agreement, decisive in guaranteeing a “yes” vote in parliament.

U.S. Impediments

The most likely killers of the agreements now are Senator Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress. Both the Czechs and the Poles have been nervous that the Illinois senator would not support a deal worked out by the Bush administration. Both governments have sent out informal feelers to the Obama camp to see whether the senator would stand by the agreements. Obama advisers have suggested to both that the senator would be “constructive.”²⁷ But the senator has so far refused to state publicly that he supports the concluded negotiations.²⁸

Anti-missile defense sentiment inside the Democratic Party is still widespread, its roots going back to opposition to Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (“Star Wars”). This opposition now manifests itself not as an explicit rejection of missile defense per se but as an issue of technical competence.²⁹ Democrats and Senator Obama have suggested that no system should be fielded until proven to work.³⁰ But this runs contrary to how the Bush administration and the Missile Defense Agency have moved forward with the ground-based system in Alaska, testing and deploying at the same time. Because the proposed missile defense system for Europe is a “system of systems,” it needs to actually be constructed to be tested. The real issue in this program will not be fielding new technology—of which there is not much—but getting the bugs out once it is up and running. Delaying site development and construction in Poland and the Czech Republic until every subcomponent is tested to near perfection is a backhanded way of delaying the program’s deployment altogether.

Democratic queasiness about missile defense is also short-sighted. If a President Obama (or a President McCain) has no intention of striking Iran’s nuclear weapons facilities, then his administration will have to come up with a defensive containment strategy for dealing with nuclear-armed mullahs. Missile defense systems in Europe and in the Middle East will inevitably be part of this approach. If the current missile defense plans fail

now, however, it is very unlikely that an Obama administration would be able to revive it later. The tide will have irretrievably turned in Europe.

If Obama wins the presidency and signals publicly that he backs the agreements signed by the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic, it is doubtful that a Democratic Congress would refuse to fund them at the required levels. If John McCain wins the election, then a Democratic Congress might prove more obstreperous in funding missile defense in Europe. Congress could in theory allocate sufficient funds for missile defense but include conditions, primarily about testing, that could halt the project.³¹ Although the Bush administration had originally intended to make European missile defense an irreversible reality by January 2008, that has not happened. The current planned expenditure of \$4.03 billion, which covers fiscal years 2008–2013, will likely have to be supplemented by several billion dollars to account for the additional monies required to fulfill the agreements signed with Poland and the Czech Republic.³² A Democratic Congress and the next president will have to maintain support for the program or it will die. Sikorski has already warned that Congress needs to follow through on the completed negotiations. “The implementation of the Ballistic Missile Defense Agreement will require political commitment of both sides and appropriate funding,” Sikorski wrote in a September 9 letter to House Appropriations Committee chairman David Obey. “A significant reduction in funding for the missile-defense site in Europe may be interpreted in Poland as a lack of commitment to the common defense against missile threats.”³³

The Future of U.S.-European Relations

What *ought* to be clear is that if the European-based missile defense agreement fails now, it will be devastating to U.S.-European relations. The government in Prague will fall, and the Tusk government could be terminally weakened. Although not everyone in the Bush administration appreciates the point, the transatlanticists have stuck their necks out in both the Czech Republic and Poland. If missile defense fails, pro-American forces throughout Europe will take a serious hit, and those Europeans, like former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who want to see Europe

move away from the United States will be considerably strengthened. The widespread European reflex to appease Russia would likely grow, perhaps exponentially. Putin’s Russia, which has attempted to intimidate both Poland and the Czech Republic into abandoning missile defense, will rightfully claim victory, no doubt seeing its menacing threats as part of its successful approach.

The clerical regime in Tehran, which had dutifully practiced a divide-and-conquer approach to the United States and Europe under presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, will also claim victory, underscoring America’s wish to make Europeans the foot soldiers in Washington’s misguided Middle Eastern policies. It is not at all unlikely that the ripple effect of a missile defense defeat will weaken American efforts to encourage greater European unity in implementing tougher sanctions against Tehran—the only bipartisan strategy that Democrats and Republicans currently have for dealing with the clerical regime’s nuclear aspirations.

Bush’s successor ought to look back at the saga of European missile defense and realize that Rumsfeld’s Old Europe/New Europe juxtaposition was a dangerous illusion: Eastern Europe is not a secure pro-American bastion, let alone one that can be pitted against the richer, culturally seductive, often more anti-American countries of Western Europe. Although fortified by the violent, predatory behavior of Vladimir Putin, America’s position in the European part of the Soviet empire is delicate. In short, the United States needs to get missile defense right, which means, first and foremost, helping the governments in Poland and the Czech Republic convince their publics that cooperating with the United States on an issue (the Iranian missile threat) that seems only indirectly of concern to them has tangible benefits to their own security.

It is often said that the war in Afghanistan will either make or break NATO—and it is still far too soon to know whether the United States and its allies can devise a winning counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. Ironically, NATO took over the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in August 2003 because Lord George Robertson, the former secretary general of NATO, wanted to show after 9/11 that Article Five meant something and that the bad blood over Iraq would not destroy transatlantic cooperation.³⁴ At the time, Afghanistan looked more akin to a peacekeeping mission than hard combat. Obviously,

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that is no longer the case. And just as obvious, Washington does not need a two-front challenge to the Atlantic alliance. Failure in either European missile defense or Afghanistan could prove to be a grave, perhaps even fatal, blow to the Western partnership—a partnership that, however frustrating and disappointing at times, is still a key ingredient in any serious American grand strategy. And success in missile defense is vastly easier than winning in Obama’s “right war.” Unlike our travails in Afghanistan, if we lose in Europe, we really only have ourselves to blame.

Notes

1. Frank Bruni, “France and Germany Caution Bush on Missile Defense Plan,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2001. Chirac viewed the Bush administration’s developing plan as a “fantastic incentive to proliferate” weapons because terrorists or hostile states could build more missiles or other arms in an attempt to overcome the new defenses.
2. *Ibid.* The author lived in Brussels at this time and dealt regularly with EU and NATO issues. Within NATO and the EU, skepticism and concern about a European-based, U.S.-run missile defense system was much more common among our Western European allies than among Central and Eastern Europeans, who wanted to maintain a closer defense and intelligence partnership with the United States.
3. When an Iranian opposition group, the Mujahideen-e Khalq, revealed the Islamic Republic’s massive clandestine nuclear program in August 2002, the EU-3 responded by entering into negotiations with the government of Mohammad Khatami in October 2003. These negotiations were not prompted by a widespread fear in Europe of an Iranian nuclear weapon. According to officials involved with the EU-3 talks, the Europeans worried far more about George W. Bush attacking Iran than they did about Iran’s clerical overlord, Ali Khamenei, coming into possession of nuclear arms. In 2003, unlike 2008, there was no firm consensus among the French, British, and Germans about the intention and determination of the Iranian regime to build atomic weapons.
4. John C. Freed, “Poll Finds a Broad Desire to Cooperate with Russia; Trans-Atlantic Divide on U.S. Missile Plan,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 28, 2008.
5. Judy Dempsey, “U.S. Shield on Missiles Progresses; Czechs to Sign Treaty for Radar This Week,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 7, 2008. See also Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 24, 2008), 10; and Vienne Maurin Picard, “Le bouclier américain divise les Tchèques” [The American Missile Shield Divides the Czechs], *Le Figaro*, October 14, 2007.
6. Vienne Maurin Picard, “Le bouclier américain divise les Tchèques.”
7. For EU-Czech transfers, see “Brussels Formally Approves Czech Plan to Draw EU Money,” *Romea.cz*, July 27, 2007, available at www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_433 (accessed October 9, 2008).
8. “Leftist Czech Opposition Wins Landslide in Regional Elections,” *Associated Press*, October 19, 2008.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Conversations with senior Czech officials from October 2007 through September 2008. See also Judy Dempsey and Dan Bilefsky, “U.S. and Czechs Sign Pact on Missile Shield; Russia Warns of a Military Response,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 9, 2008.
11. The author was a guest at the May 5 conference.
12. Conversation with a senior Czech official in Prague, August 29, 2008.
13. Conversations with Polish officials in 2007 and 2008.
14. See Judy Dempsey, “Poland Signals a Shift on U.S. Missile Shield; Foreign Minister Cites Costs and Risks,” *International Herald Tribune*, January 7, 2008.
15. Quoted in Judy Dempsey, “Accord on Missile Shield Taking Form, Czechs Say; Agreements Relate to U.S. Deployment,” *International Herald Tribune*, January 17, 2008.
16. See Radek Sikorski, “Don’t Take Poland for Granted,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2007.
17. See Judy Dempsey, “Poland Sets Talks with Russia Over U.S. Shield; NATO Welcomes Bilateral Discussions,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 19, 2007; Judy Dempsey, “Poland Signals a Shift on U.S. Missile Shield; Foreign Minister Cites Costs and Risk”; and Judy Dempsey, “Allies on the U.S. Missile Shield; Poles and Czechs Will Coordinate Negotiations with Washington,” *International Herald Tribune*, January 11, 2008.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Conversations with U.S. and Polish officials in 2007 and 2008.
20. Judy Dempsey, “U.S. Talks of Bypassing Poland on Shield; Pressure Increased on Antimissile Plan,” *International Herald Tribune*, May 8, 2008. See also Judy Dempsey, “Poland Looks to U.S. as Crucial Part of Its Defense,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 22, 2008.
21. A maximum figure of 250 U.S. personnel in the Czech Republic is currently planned for the radar base. This figure comes from conversations with both Czech and American officials, May 2008.
22. See commentary by Polish defense minister Bogdan Klich in Judy Dempsey, “Poland Looks to U.S. as Crucial Part of Its Defense.”
23. Quoted in Tom Shanker and Nicholas Kulich, “Russia Lashes Out on Missile Defense,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2008.

24. Ibid.

25. Quoted in Judy Dempsey, "U.S. Talks of Bypassing Poland on Shield; Pressure Increased on Antimissile Plan."

26. Czech officials constantly talk about the nefarious potential of Russian money in the country. Corruption is an issue that Czechs talk about frequently, but it is extremely difficult to gauge reliably how Russian money may buy influence in Czech politics.

27. Conversations with Obama advisers and Czech and Polish officials from May to October 2008.

28. The clearest statement that Obama has made on this issue was during the first 2008 presidential debate, in Oxford, Mississippi, when he said, "And we—we are spending billions of dollars on missile defense. And I actually believe that we need missile defense, because of Iran and North Korea and the potential for them to obtain or to launch nuclear weapons, but I also believe that, when we are only spending a few hundred million dollars on nuclear proliferation, then we're making a mistake."

29. Janine Zacharia, "Clinton, Obama Question Bush's European Missile Defense Plan," *Bloomberg.com*, April 4, 2008; and Ben Smith, "Distinctions on Defense," *Politico.com* blog, November 9, 2007. See also Office of Barack Obama,

"Statement on Visit of Polish President Lech Kaczynski," news release, July 16, 2007, available at http://obama.senate.gov/press/070716-obama_statement_73/ (accessed October 9, 2008).

30. Interestingly, this is an objection that European critics of missile defense do not regularly make. It is not that America is providing a false shield to Europe or that missile defense would be good if it were 100 percent reliable. The European objections have much more to do with whether Europeans should stand by the United States against threats that many Europeans do not see as directly against Europe and whether a European-U.S. military partnership in fact makes Europeans targets.

31. Conditions and expressions of congressional concern about testing are in FY 2008 expenditures for European missile defense. See Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe*, 18–19.

32. Ibid.

33. Quoted in Bill Gertz, "Polish Missile Defense," *Washington Times*, September 18, 2008.

34. See Michael Gordon, "Threats and Responses: Afghanistan Security; NATO Chief Says Alliance Needs Role in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, February 21, 2003.