

Statement: Congressman Robert Wexler

May 3, 2006

Hearing: The United States and NATO: Transformation and the Riga Summit

Chairman Gallegly, thank you for holding today's hearing. I would also like to thank Mr. Volker and Mr. Fata for testifying before the subcommittee today.

In February, I met with NATO Secretary General Scheffer (Skeffer) in Brussels to express my strong support for NATO's historic transformation from a cold war military alliance to one capable of addressing the security challenges of the 21st century. I saw first hand the critical transformation taking place at NATO with the alliance now operating in various capacities from security and peacekeeping duties to assisting disaster relief efforts in Europe, Africa and Asia.

In order for NATO to meet 21st Century challenges in far-flung places such as humanitarian operations in Pakistan or assisting the Africa Union in preventing genocide in Darfur – the transatlantic alliance must undergo as Supreme Allied Commander General Jones has stated "its most fundamental physical and philosophical transformation in its history."

There is no doubt in my mind, that success in Afghanistan is paramount to NATO's successful transformation. This is NATO's most difficult and far-reaching operation in over fifty-seven years and is the first outside of Europe. It is also essential that the 2002 Prague capabilities commitments are fulfilled including meeting an October 6 deadline for the NATO Response Force to reach full operational capability.

Despite the shared desires of America and Europe to transform the alliance I am concerned that NATO will not be up to task and unable to fulfill and sustain its missions. To this end it is essential that NATO members, especially European countries meet their political, military and financial obligations. Today only six of 25 members are spending more than 2 percent of their GDP on defense.

The Riga summit is an opportunity to further set the agenda and pace of NATO's evolving transformation. It is critical that the United States play a leading role there in pushing NATO transformation as it has done at Prague in 2002 and Istanbul in 2004.

At Riga the Administration should reemphasize our desire to strengthen cooperation at NATO with our European allies, in particular the European Union. Mr. Volker I share your sentiments that our "relationship with Europe is not principally about Europe itself, but rather how well we work together with Europe on our global strategic agenda – to the contest of ideas, of freedom versus fanaticism."

As was addressed by NATO Foreign Minister's in Bulgaria last week, NATO must be an "alliance with global partners. It is critical as NATO's engages in far reaching operations

that we strengthen partnerships with interested democratic and militarily capable countries such as Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea and Israel.

Riga can also serve as catalyst to chart a course of closer NATO cooperation with countries participating in the Mediterranean Dialogue and in particular Israel. In February, I introduced a resolution along with Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen which states our support for upgrading relations between NATO and Israel. As a fellow democracy that faces the real threat of a nuclear Iran, I strongly believe Israel, which has significant military and counter-terrorism experience can only strengthen NATO's collective defense.

Finally, NATO must also keep the door open to membership for Albania, Croatia and Macedonia as well Ukraine and Georgia who have stated their ambition to join the Alliance. NATO membership continues to be a strong incentive for non-member countries to further democratize and reform their military and this door must not be closed.

Mr. Chairman, I doubt there is anyone in this room who at the end of the Cold War could have envisioned or anticipated NATO's growing multi-functional global role. NATO's current evolution is monumental and hopefully positions the alliance in the strongest possible position to address 21st security challenges.