Many interviews were conducted in the course of researching this book. From Washington, DC to Brussels, from Moscow to Sophia, Bulgaria, dozens of men and women with unique expertise in NATO, the European Union, transatlantic relations, and the war on terror were generous in sharing their time and insights. Each interview was conducted along similar lines and began with this introduction: “I am examining a central paradox gripping NATO today” individuals were informed. “Despite the outward appearance of dynamic activity and a host of reforms designed to revitalize the organization, NATO has never known a time of greater division and uncertainty leading so many to question the long-term viability of the Alliance.”

After giving assurances that I was not a U.S. neoconservative eager to dance on NATO’s grave, but rather an advocate of multilateralism and international institutions, the argument was summarized. “The evidence since 9/11,” I began, “indeed, the entire record of NATO’s post–Cold War trajectory since 1991, indicates that despite the best efforts of Alliance supporters and notable achievements in Bosnia and Kosovo, NATO has grown increasingly peripheral to its members and possesses limited ability to facilitate significant military operations.” This conclusion was reached after consideration of three overarching factors. The first centered on the differing national interests and threat perceptions among the members, the second focused on competing foreign policy agendas, and, the third, on the military capabilities gap. In short, without agreement upon a common threat to vital interests, NATO is operating at the margins to which the Iraq crisis and the ongoing mission in Afghanistan attest.

The majority of individuals interviewed either worked for NATO in Brussels or interacted with the Alliance as policymakers or diplomats.
from member-states. Few rejected the argument out of hand, though some did assert that publicizing NATO’s decline was needlessly harming transatlantic relations. Many acknowledged that NATO’s future was in question owing to the factors that were identified. However, rather than accept NATO’s decline as an unalterable reality, these individuals were working with NATO to assure that the decline thesis did not become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A number of interview participants observed that the “jury was still out” on NATO and noted that it was too soon to publish a book entitled “NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline.” As one U.S. State Department official observed, “NATO today (2005) should be evaluated on the overall progress it has made during the past fifteen years and not denigrated for failing to successfully engage each and every threat to Western interests.”

This chapter reviews NATO’s fifteen-year post–Cold War journey and the evidence presented in the preceding chapters, focusing on national interests, competing threat perceptions, changes in NATO’s alliance structure, and the military capabilities gap. The next and final chapter considers NATO’s future and likely trends in transatlantic relations. While the NATO Alliance will continue for many years to come, the conclusion highlights issues that NATO watchers should scrutinize when gauging the validity of the arguments advanced in this work. In addition to events that will occupy and undermine the Alliance, the conclusion examines the continuing evolution of the European Union and its likely impact on NATO and U.S.–European relations.

Say It Isn’t So

Before reviewing this work’s central findings, a final statement by NATO’s supporters is in order. As noted in the introduction, the NATO Alliance is championed by many individuals and officials, governments and institutions. Thoughtful advocates of NATO do not deny the problems confronting the Alliance or transatlantic relations. Rather, these individuals devote enormous time and energy to sustaining the Alliance and repairing the damage inflicted by events and disputes among members. Still, for some NATO supporters, the arguments advanced in this work will be viewed as tiresome, predictable, and counterproductive. As Paul Cornish wrote in the pages of International Affairs in 2004, “The NATO-is-dying thesis is nothing new, and has been part of the general clutter of the US-European security