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NATO at 70: The Way Ahead

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The views expressed are the authors own.

On April 4, 1949, the foreign ministers of the United States, Canada, and ten Western European states met in Washington to sign a novel defense pact. Barely four years after the end of World War II the U.S. and Canada committed themselves to the military protection of Western Europe, thereby refusing to give in to isolationist temptations. Yet not all contemporary observers were aware of the historical significance of the new Treaty. *The Washington Post* quipped that the signing ceremony was “probably more spectacular than the act itself.” And the State Department’s band, in a slightly awkward attempt to pay homage to the First Lady, Bess Truman, played a medley from the Gershwin musical “Porgy and Bess,” including “I got plenty o’ nuttin’” and “It ain’t necessarily so.”

Other observers, however, realized that the new transatlantic defense pact was far more than just a promise of assistance on a piece of paper. U.S. political commentator Walter Lippmann put it best: “The Pact ... will be remembered long after the conditions that have provoked it are no longer the main business of mankind. For the treaty recognizes and proclaims a community of interest which is much older than the conflict with the Soviet Union, and come what may, will survive it.”¹

Lippmann was proven right. The Atlantic community he described lasted much longer than its founding fathers ever dreamed of. But 70 years of successful transatlantic cooperation say little about NATO’s future. Even though the number of member states has almost tripled since



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NATO's birth, and even though NATO has grown far beyond a mere collective defense alliance, the Alliance today needs to respond to challenges that have little in common with those it had to confront when it was founded. Faced with Russian revisionism, the emergence of new powers, rapid technological progress, new ways of warfare, and U.S. demands for more equitable burden sharing, NATO has reached an inflexion point. Five reasons stand out.

First, all three key assumptions on which NATO's post-Cold War evolution were based have collapsed. The assumption that Russia would remain cooperative was buried in Crimea and Donbass. The same applies to the assumption that the gradual enlargement of Western institutions could be reconciled with Russia's interests. If Ukraine's desire for a mere association with the European Union means the *casus belli* for Russia, the vision of a "Europe whole and free" cannot be fully realized. Moreover, the ambivalent results of the Afghanistan mission have invalidated yet a third assumption: the assumption that after the Cold War's end NATO would draw its legitimacy predominantly from the conduct of major crisis management operations outside Europe. In short, the time when NATO's evolution seemed to take place almost on "autopilot" is over.

Second, collective defense and deterrence against Russia can no longer be NATO's only strategic task, as was the case in the Cold War. After all, Russia is not the Soviet Union and Putin is not Stalin. The Russian challenge is primarily regional, e.g. a quick military fait accompli in a Baltic State. The Cold War scenario of a massive attack in which Warsaw Pact troops would seek to advance all the way to the Atlantic is no longer the defining yardstick for NATO's military planning. Moreover, the strategic outlook of the southern NATO members differs markedly from that of the Eastern European allies: for the allies along the Northern Mediterranean, instability in North Africa and the Middle East could have a far greater security impact than a more assertive Russia. In other words, in the age of globalization, NATO's return to a "single issue" alliance has become impossible. If NATO wants to offer all of its allies a genuine security home, it will have no choice but to engage in an occasionally painful balancing act between providing conventional and nuclear deterrence in the East while also "projecting stability" to the South.

Third, the nature of many 21st century threats runs counter to NATO's traditional approach to political decision-making and military planning. The times when peace, crisis and conflict were three distinct phases are over. Cyberattacks are hitting nations below the threshold of a kinetic attack; social-media campaigns create alternative realities that seek to destabilize political communities without a single soldier crossing a single border; and the "hybrid" combination of military and non-military instruments blurs the boundaries between peace and war, making NATO's situational awareness and, consequently, consensual and speedy decision-making far more difficult.



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Fourth, the United States is losing patience with what it sees as inexcusable military underperformance by many of its European allies. President Trump may articulate this impatience in an unusually blunt way, but the hard-hitting speech by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Brussels in 2011 had already revealed the degree of discontent even among traditional “Atlanticists.”² As early as 1951, NATO’s first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Dwight Eisenhower, argued that he considered the NATO project to have failed if ten years from now U.S. troops were still deployed in Europe.³ Such a withdrawal remains unlikely, given the Russia challenge as well as Europe’s role as hub for U.S. global operations, yet the U.S. will increasingly judge NATO by the political will and the financial and military ability of allies to invest in the Alliance. In other words, the debate on transatlantic burden-sharing, which European allies and Canada have always tried to dodge, is here to stay.

Fifth, the international environment is again characterized by strategic competition. The “post-Cold War era,” which had led a triumphant West to believe that the rest of the world would sooner or later adopt its model, has come to an end. Emerging actors like China do not see Western ideas of democracy and pluralism as a model worth converging towards. On the contrary, there is much to suggest that the Chinese model will increasingly compete with the Western model. Worse, even within the West itself doubts are growing as to the viability of established policies. The crisis of the European Union and the affection of considerable sections of society for authoritarian political leaders show that past assumptions about the “irreversibility” of achievements such as the European integration process must be revisited. Transatlantic tensions over trade imbalances or the 5G standard add to this predicament. In short, the power of the West to shape the global agenda is diminishing.

Against this backdrop, any triumphalism would seem wholly misplaced. The allies can rightly be proud of what they have achieved, but NATO’s success is no longer determined by a 1949 yardstick. NATO’s future viability as a transatlantic security instrument will depend on how quickly and comprehensively it adapts to the new security environment. Here, too, there are five areas in which NATO must engage.

First, allies must use NATO not only as a military coordination tool, but also as a political forum to discuss all security-related issues. A forward-looking discussion must not be confined to issues that involve NATO militarily, but should also broach issues that are relevant to allies’ security at large, such as, for example, the manifold implications of China’s rise, the strategic implications of foreign direct investments in allied countries, the political, military and economic consequences of climate change, or the consequences of falling oil prices for energy producers in the Middle East. Such a discussion culture must be supported by enhanced intelligence sharing and internal analyses of long-term political, economic and technological developments.



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Second, NATO needs to closely follow the evolution of technology and its implications for how future conflicts will be fought. These include “hybrid” warfare, as demonstrated by Russia during the annexation of Crimea, cyberattacks, and seeking political influence through hostile (dis)information campaigns. The partnership with other institutions such as the European Union, as well as with the private sector, must be deepened in order to detect hybrid attacks sooner and to react more rapidly to them. At the same time, the question of deterring such attacks - for example through the willingness to publicly “name and shame” the perpetrators - must be examined more closely. Allies must also undertake greater efforts to strengthen the resilience of their societies and critical infrastructures. Finally, NATO also needs to address new developments in software (e.g. Artificial Intelligence) and defense technology (e.g. autonomous weapon systems). While these technologies may offer many military advantages, they also raise operational and ethical questions that need to be understood.

Third, NATO must maintain its partnership network. The process of establishing relations with some 40 non-NATO states, which started immediately after the end of the Cold War, is one of the greatest successes in the Alliance’s history. Partner countries have made a significant contribution to NATO-led operations such as those in Afghanistan, thereby enhancing these operations’ military clout and political legitimacy. Over time, this has made NATO and some of its partners not only militarily interoperable, but also politically. NATO’s return to collective defense against Russia, however, could increase the risk that partners other than Sweden and Finland might lose interest in working closely with the alliance. Such a development must be countered by new initiatives, for example in areas such as training and enhancing interoperability. After all, NATO’s next crisis management operation - which would require the support of partner countries - could happen sooner than one may think.

Fourth, NATO must maintain its dual approach of deterrence and dialogue vis-à-vis Russia. The current controversy over Russia’s violations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty shows once again that relations between Russia and the West are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future. Russia will continue to see herself as being under siege, and will revert to a multitude of means to keep the West out of its “zone of privileged interests” (Medvedev). The West, on the other hand, cannot renege on basic principles, such as the right for each state to choose its own security alignments. Even if the NATO-Russia framework is not suited for an improvement in relations (which needs to happen on a much higher level), passivity is not an option for NATO. The Alliance must complement the build-up of its “Enhanced Forward Presence” in the East with a persistent offer of dialogue with Moscow. This is important for maintaining a degree of political predictability, but also to signal to Western electorates that NATO, for its part, is not interested in a new Cold War.

Fifth, NATO must help rebalance transatlantic relations. The crisis between Ukraine and Russia has once again brought home the unique U.S. role as “Europe’s American Pacifier” (Josef Joffe). The rapid deployment of troops and military equipment to Eastern Europe as part of the



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“European Reassurance Initiative” has shown how much the U.S. still considers itself a “European power.” However, the group of traditional Atlanticists in the U.S. is shrinking, while complaints about the unfair sharing of burdens within the Alliance are growing. For this reason, an increase in European defense budgets is inescapable, even though the scope and speed of this increase will vary from country to country. It remains to be seen whether the latest collective steps, such as the European Commission’s Defense Fund or the French-inspired European Intervention Initiative, will manage to send the right signals to Washington. If they were to result in a tangible increase in European capabilities, they could go a long way in soothing U.S. concerns. If, on the other hand, Europe were to remain trapped in its traditional reflexes of putting rhetoric (“strategic autonomy”) over substance, progress would remain elusive.

At age 70, NATO is forced to adapt to a completely new security environment. This adjustment process could turn out to be the most difficult and painful in the history of the Alliance. But 70 years of successful transatlantic cooperation show how much can be achieved if one combines enlightened self-interest with a willingness to work together. To once more quote Walter Lippmann: “The peoples who live around the shores of the Atlantic are many nations, but they are also one of the great and enduring communities of the modern age.”⁴

1. Walter Lippmann, “Atlantic Pact Will Entail New Understandings,” *The Argus* (Australia), 21 April 1949, available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/22723693?browse=ndp%3Abrowse%2Ftitle%2FA%2Ftitle%2F13%2F1949%2F04%2F21%2Fpage%2F1719938%2Farticle%2F22723693>.
2. Robert Gates’ farewell speech on NATO, Brussels, 10 June 2011, available at <https://www.voltairenet.org/article170425.html>.
3. In 1953, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened to undertake an “agonizing reappraisal” of Washington’s commitment to European security if the rearmament of West Germany through the European Defence Community (EDC) came to nothing.
4. Lippmann, “Atlantic Pact Will Entail New Understandings,” op. cit.

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