

An Interview with Michael Rühle

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Q. How do you assess the changes in the international strategic environment that have occurred over the past few decades? Is the NATO Alliance facing a more or less dangerous strategic situation and is the Alliance better prepared now to confront likely security challenges in the future?

A. Compared to the early 1990s, today's strategic environment looks far more dire: Russia's attack on Ukraine has brought war back to Europe, China is becoming increasingly assertive in pursuing its national interests, and the Middle East remains in turmoil. Other developments, ranging from Emerging Disruptive Technologies to climate change to fake news campaigns, also demonstrate that the environment in which NATO finds itself today is far more complex than in the immediate post-Cold War era. That said, if you look at NATO's transformation, notably since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, one can notice a steep learning curve. NATO's renewed focus on conventional and nuclear deterrence, and the substantial increase in Allied defense budgets are perhaps the most obvious signs, but one could also mention the designation of space and cyber as distinctive domains, the enhanced focus on resilience and new technologies, and the stronger role in the protection of critical energy infrastructure. Due to its multilateral makeup, things in NATO move slowly, but they do move.

Q. What do you consider to be the three most urgent strategic problems facing the West today and what should we do about them? Do European views on security threats align with or diverge from American views?

A. Problem No. 1: The rise of China as the West's global competitor. Both Europe and the United States have realized that China's rise could create a host of problems. However, I do not (yet) see an alignment of views between the transatlantic Allies. Since the U.S. debate is focused on the defense of Taiwan, it is far more alarmist. Moreover, only a few European allies have hard security interests in the Asia-Pacific region as well as the military power projection capabilities to defend them. That said, both the European Union and NATO have become much more outspoken about China as a country that challenges the West on many levels. In Europe, the discussion about de-risking supply chains or on the perils of selling important Western infrastructure to China is becoming far more serious – as it should be.

Problem No. 2: Russia's use of force to at least partly reverse Europe's post-1990 achievements. I do not believe that Putin wants to re-create the Soviet Union, but he has used military force several times to keep the West out of what his sidekick Medvedev called "Russia's zone of privileged interests." Lucky for us, the war in Ukraine is currently decimating Russian military power. Hence, a postwar Russia will be much weaker militarily,



which should temper Putin's ambitions. However, even after the war Russia will be a major player with whom the West will have to deal – through deterrence and, if at all possible, dialogue.

Problem No. 3: The rise of illiberalism within the West itself. It seems as if more and more people within Western societies respond to the world's complexities by reverting to simplistic answers, through denial, or even by getting hooked on conspiracy theories. This makes them particularly vulnerable to hostile fake news campaigns and to populists who promise easy fixes for all of their woes. This tendency towards a "post-truth" approach is a fundamental challenge for any responsible security policy, which must be based on rational thinking and facts. Illiberalism undermines Western cohesion, preventing the West from prevailing in the geostrategic competition that will increasingly characterize our strategic environment.

Q. In light of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, the greatest outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence in the Middle East in decades, Chinese threats to the autonomy of Taiwan, North Korea's accelerating missile program and nuclear threats, and Iran's enrichment of uranium to near weapons-grade levels, is NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept "fit for purpose" in addressing the security challenges of today and tomorrow?

A. In my view, the 2022 *Strategic Concept* pushes all the right buttons. It mentions Russia explicitly as a threat, and it refers to China as a concern. This is a major departure from the 2010 *Concept*, that was based on a partnership with Russia and did not even mention China. The *Concept* also refers to non-kinetic threats, which are becoming ever more important, and it touches upon other challenges, such as energy security and climate change. Of course, the real litmus test for NATO is not drafting a convincing policy document, but its willingness and ability to implement the key tenets of that document. The new *Military Strategy* and the new force plans indicate that, at least with respect to Russia, the *Concept* is being implemented. Add to this NATO's accelerated work on resilience as well as on innovation, and what you get is an alliance that is truly adapting to a changing security environment.

Q. French President Macron has suggested Europe should rely more on its own independent defense capabilities rather than depend heavily on the United States for its security. In your view, is this a good idea? What does it say about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees? Do Europeans believe the United States "has their back" in the event of a wider conflict on the continent?

A. Like previous French Presidents, Emanuel Macron says sensible things, but does so in a way that is bound to alienate many observers, including his European neighbors. Getting Europe to do more on defense is a goal pursued by all U.S. administrations since 1949. In that sense, Macron has it right. However, his talk about European "strategic autonomy" makes it sound as if doing more on defense was part of Europe's self-assertion against U.S. dominance. This is a counterproductive rhetoric, as virtually all European countries want to organize

their security together with the United States and not alienate its key ally. It is true that many Europeans worry that the next U.S. administration may again look at NATO as a kind of business deal that works to the detriment of the U.S. taxpayer. But even if such views were to gain prominence in Washington, Europe's answer should not be to cry wolf about the alleged end of extended deterrence. Instead, Europe should double down on consultations with the United States on nuclear matters. A lot will depend on public rhetoric. For example, U.S. nuclear policy under President Trump was very strong on extended deterrence, but President Trump's dismissive attitude towards NATO and towards Europe obfuscated this positive development.

Q. Do you believe arms control can still play a role in reducing tensions and creating stability among the nuclear powers? Should arms control discussions be expanded to include China? And if China refuses to participate, what should the United States do?

A. The current environment is not conducive to arms control. Russia has violated agreements and China prefers to sit on the fence. It is important for the United States to call out both sides on their intransigence, if only to deflect criticism of being dismissive of arms control agreements. Arms control may still have some value, in particular when it comes to establishing mechanisms or procedures to prevent dangerous military incidents, for example. But major agreements like SALT or START will no longer be in the offing. Once China feels that its massive armament programs have put it on a par with the United States and Russia, its willingness to engage on arms control might perhaps increase. But for the foreseeable future, arms control will have to confine itself to small, practical and reversible steps to reduce nuclear dangers.

Q. NATO remains a nuclear alliance. But NATO's nuclear capabilities—particularly those U.S. nonstrategic nuclear weapons based in Europe—are limited and ageing, especially when compared to the nuclear forces of Russia. Would European NATO members be willing to consider a more robust deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil? Does an increase in NATO's nuclear potential make sense in today's volatile international security environment?

A. I am less concerned about specific weapons systems than about maintaining Allied consensus on the nuclear dossier. That's why I very much welcome the consolidation of NATO's nuclear dimension with new hardware, such as the F-35, NATO's exercises, and other aspects of its nuclear policy and posture. I would also note an unapologetic endorsement of nuclear deterrence, and a unanimous rejection of the Nuclear Ban Treaty. Hence, I see NATO moving in the right direction. Whether Russia's nuclear deployments will force NATO to respond with new nuclear deployments of its own is currently impossible to predict. What seems likely, however, is the inclusion of some Eastern European allies in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. While this may most likely require ending the 1997 NATO-Russia

Founding Act, it would mark a boost for extended deterrence. In any case, Russia's behavior has long invalidated the Founding Act.

Q. Should European countries invest more in missile defense technologies to protect NATO territory and populations in the event of a failure of deterrence? Is NATO currently doing enough in this area?

A. Russia's war against Ukraine has only reinforced the tremendous strategic value of missile defense, including for the defense of population centers. All major allies are investing in missile defense, and some have fielded quite advanced technologies. Missile defense remains expensive, however, and even a highly sophisticated defense can be overwhelmed, as we can see in Israel. And, of course, missile defense competes with other defense projects, some of which may appear more urgent. But the strategic rationale of missile defense is undisputed. The recent European Sky Shield initiative is another example of this. It envisages, among other things, the joint procurement of new air and missile defense capabilities, with a view to making them available to SACEUR, NATO's commander in chief.

Q. Is Europe too dependent on energy supplies from Russia that may be vulnerable to disruption as a result of political tensions? How can Europe best meet its energy needs in support of its security requirements?

A. Russia's assault on Ukraine was accompanied by Moscow's weaponization of energy against Europe. This demonstrated once again that economic interdependence does not necessarily guarantee peace, and that Europe had to end its dependence on Russia as its main supplier. Thanks to other suppliers, mainly Norway and the United States, Europe was able to phase Russian energy largely out of their energy mix. This also includes NATO's armed forces, which used to rely heavily on Russian fuel. If you add to this the general energy transition away from fossil fuel, the West has many opportunities to blunt Russia's energy weapon. The main challenge of the future will be to avoid new dependencies on other potentially unreliable suppliers, such as China, which holds a considerable part of the known reserves of "rare earths" that are essential for "green" technologies, such as more capable batteries.