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Resetting NATO and European strategic autonomy



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NATO's 70th birthday party in London on 3-4 December left the impression of an Alliance in political disarray. It resembled not a brain-dead NATO à la Macron, but certainly an Alliance suffering from a serious illness. It looks like the patient will not recover very soon. Hope is instead vested in one of the few decisions taken at the London Leaders' Meeting, to task a group of wise persons to reflect on the patient's ailments and potential cures. The diagnosis is aimed at strengthening the political dimension of the Alliance. The Group's precise mandate and time schedule still

have to be defined. Taking into account the US presidential elections in November 2020, it will most probably be tasked to provide its recommendations in the course of 2021. In the meantime the Alliance has to sail through stormy weather as the transatlantic tensions are unlikely to disappear by themselves.

NATO has many problems. Europe's East and South are divided on the Alliance's security priorities, in short Russia versus the Sahel. Turkey has become a disputable ally, buying air defence missiles from Russia while its

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relations with the US are at a historic low. However, the fundamental problem is the cold air blowing through the transatlantic relationship since Donald Trump entered the White House. The US and Europe have quarrelled throughout NATO's history, but never before has a situation existed where there is fundamental mistrust in the leadership of the Alliance's dominant member state and, vice versa, where an American president questions NATO's existence and suggests that the US might not come to Europe's assistance if under attack. Thus, after the London meeting any discussion of the political dimension of NATO will have to include the key question of how to reset the transatlantic relationship. This can only be addressed in combination with a topic which was put on the agenda by the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 but has been carefully avoided by European leaders, namely European strategic autonomy.

Both for NATO's survival and for Europe's own defence, a new US-European bargain is required. The political dimension of NATO cannot be separated from military burden-sharing. The latter has become the litmus test for continued American support for NATO. At the same time, Europe can no longer escape the question of defining its own level of ambition if it wants to achieve strategic autonomy, in other words to act on its own militarily if needed. With the start of the Von der Leyen Commission, its ambition to develop a geopolitical Union, and the Franco-German proposal to initiate a Conference on the Future of Europe – with security and defence on the agenda – the time has come to address this crucial issue.

A new American-European security bargain is needed. It cannot be expressed only in dollars or euros, as is currently the case with the almost devilish focus on the 2%



Source: NATO / Flickr

GDP defence spending target. The new bargain has to be expressed in terms of output. Capability, not cash, should drive the debate. The European allies should set themselves the goal of delivering half of NATO's conventional forces, based on the Alliance's existing military level of ambition of two major joint military operations and six smaller ones at the same time. The same output target could also provide Europe with a military capability for autonomous action, either for crisis management or, in the worst case, for its own defence in case the US does not come to Europe's assistance or does so with limited forces. In other words, Europe needs a Plan B contingency. Such a capability-driven European target would give substance to the aim of better burden-sharing in the Alliance. It would also provide European countries with a concrete common aim for capability development. Furthermore, if the European contribution to NATO is the same military ambition as for European strategic autonomy, the EU-NATO rivalry on defence matters could be brought to an end.

What is required for such a new American-European security bargain? First, European political leaders must approach security and defence at a European level and no longer from a predominantly national perspective.

No longer can any European country guarantee the security of its citizens on its own, as we often hear European political leaders say. Very true, but then one needs to be consistent: replace national cycles of defence planning, equipment procurement, maintenance and logistics with multinational arrangements in order to realise full interoperability and standardisation as well as stop intra-European duplication and waste of money. The European Defence Fund can assist in realising this goal, assuming that a sizeable amount of euros can be spent under the EU's Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Secondly, this bargain can only work if the US ends its opposition to the idea of European strategic autonomy and, practically, the strengthening of the European Defence Industrial and Technological Base. The result of a bigger European share of the transatlantic burden – argued for so much by the US – implies not only a louder political voice for the European countries in the North Atlantic Council but equally a larger contribution from European defence industries in capability development. If NATO is to become healthy again, a Europeanisation of the Alliance coupled with a European military capability to act on its own is the prescribed medicine.

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