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The 2021 NATO Summit For better or worse?



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NATO officials must have opened bottles of champagne when Joe Biden's election as the next President of the United States was announced in December last year. A painful period of four years, in which the White House undermined, instead of strengthened the Alliance, came to an end. NATO would return to sailing in calmer waters. Better conditions for discussing the adaptation of the Alliance were to be expected. As long as Donald Trump was in the White House, an update to the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept was deemed

too risky. The NATO Summit on 14 June 2021 will launch this work. What can be expected? No doubt, there will be friendly handshaking, smiling faces and positive statements on 14 June to underline that 'NATO is back in business'. But the day after the Summit, the cumbersome and painful process will start to turn political-diplomatic expressions of goodwill into a new NATO strategy. As usual, this will prove to be more difficult, in particular as diverging interests and opposing views of the Allies will come to the fore.

A more political NATO?

When NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg appointed an independent group of experts to advise him on 'NATO 2030', one of his questions was 'how to strengthen the Alliance's political role?'. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's interference in Eastern Ukraine the Alliance has focused on modernising its armed forces. A great deal remains to be done but new security challenges have arisen in the meantime. The Alliance's nuclear and conventional forces are needed to deter military threats to the territorial integrity of its member states, but Russia and China are trying to weaken Western cohesion from the inside by other means. Russia continues to modernise its own forces, but is refraining from direct military confrontation. Instead, Moscow is conducting *hybrid operations* by using the internet and social media to destabilise Western democracies, by encouraging disagreement among NATO Allies, and, last but not least, by conducting cyberattacks on public and private infrastructure. Meanwhile, China is extending its geopolitical influence first and foremost through economic power: buying political support through its investments, such as in the Balkans; and creating dependencies by exporting raw materials, products and technology. The growing complexity of these threats and challenges is the reason why the Secretary General wants to explore the potential for renewing NATO's political role.

But what can NATO do to counter these hybrid threats? Certainly, in the cyber realm the Alliance has to ensure that its own fire walls are kept up to date. NATO can be better prepared for countering cyberattacks. NATO's strategic communications should unravel disinformation, fake news and espionage. More proactive use of social media should be encouraged, in particular to reach out to the younger generation in NATO countries. However, when it comes to protecting civil society an enhanced role for NATO is less obvious. Yes, the preamble to the NATO Treaty of 1949 refers to the member states' determination "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual

liberty and the rule of law". However, the implementation lies elsewhere, such as in the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe. Article 2 refers to strengthening economic cooperation between the Allies and in their international economic policies, in order to strengthen stability and wellbeing. Global organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, as well as regional institutions have been created to deal with those issues. The EU may still be weak as a security and defence actor, but is nevertheless a powerful global player in terms of finance and trade. The toolbox for responding to the wider set of security challenges itself has expanded and many instruments belong to other actors. The recent case of Belarus may serve as an example. Except for issuing a statement condemning the forced diversion to Minsk of the Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius in order to arrest Raman Pratasevich, there was no NATO action. The focus was on the EU and its decision to sanction Belarus. When it comes to diminishing dependencies on Chinese digital technology, rare earth minerals or medical supplies – the latter clearly shown at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic – once more the European Union and its member states have to act, not NATO.

There is a risk that enhancing NATO's political role will weaken instead of strengthen the organisation. Differences of opinion between the United States and European countries, in particular on the relationship with China, may have a negative impact on the Alliance's transatlantic cohesion. Equally, it can split countries in Europe. Of course, China, Iran or any other country or region generating security issues for North America and Europe should be discussed in NATO. Article 4 of the Treaty specifically offers the opportunity for member states to demand consultations on any subject related to their security interests. In such consultations Allies even have to consider what the consequences of the situation at hand could be for the Alliance's three core tasks of collective defence, crisis management and partnerships – as defined in the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept. But enhancing NATO's political role would be wrong. The old proverb of "Let the cobbler

stick to his last” still offers the best guidance in order to maintain NATO’s internal cohesion and to reinforce its essential role in ensuring the security of its member states. There is a need to discuss China in the NATO Council, but the Alliance should not take a political position on ‘China issues’.

Adapting the military posture

If not a ‘political’ NATO, then what should the alliance do? Since the 2014 Wales Summit the Alliance has embarked on adapting its defence and deterrence posture. Up until now, rebuilding conventional military capabilities – neglected during the two decades of Allied out-of-area crisis management operations – has received most attention: strengthening the NATO Response Force (NRF) as well as the heavy follow-on forces. The Alliance removed the dust from the military concepts and doctrines for collective defence, which also became the focus of training and exercise programmes. The recently held Exercise Steadfast Defender 2021 is a good example. This has sent the right message to an assertive Russia and has underlined the solidarity of the Alliance with the countries in Eastern Europe that are most exposed to the threats from Moscow. There is no room for complacency. In particular with regard to land forces, most European NATO members are still lacking the capabilities which are essential. So say the defence planners of the Alliance. The Netherlands is prominently on that list. In NATO’s capability reviews the country is consistently seen as falling short on delivering to Allied land forces for collective defence. They lack the necessary firepower in order to participate in collective defence operations at the high end of the spectrum. Even more shocking, NATO concludes that the Dutch are not planning to close the gap. Will The Hague invest in heavy firepower in order to be able to participate in land warfare at the highest end of the spectrum?

There is a school of thought that labels such a requirement as ‘outdated thinking’. Future warfare is about winning the digital battle, disrupting the opponent’s command

and control networks and winning the information war. Firepower will be replaced by cyber power. A technology race instead of an armaments race. All of this is nothing new: technology has always been at the forefront of military modernisation, from the rifle to the machine gun, from the cavalry on horseback to driving tanks, and from bullets to missiles. Yes, information-based warfare has become even more important as 21st century technology reduces time-schedules for delivering devastating effect from days and hours to minutes and seconds. The cyber realm can be used to disrupt the actions of an opponent or to send a signal that continued aggression will lead to escalation. But ultimately, armed forces will have to be able to do exactly that: deter the enemy from deploying its military capabilities and, if ultimately needed, to destroy the opponent’s key assets before your own systems are hit. It implies that you need both: the ability to disrupt and the capabilities to destroy.

NATO countries have to invest in Emerging and Disruptive Technologies – the new buzzword or acronym, EDTs, for what is in essence the *perpetuum mobile* of military modernisation. Military applications of artificial intelligence, unmanned systems and robotics are unavoidable and investment in these new technologies – by civil as well as the military actors – is urgently needed. At the same time, two other related items should not be forgotten. First, new technologies increase the risk of uncontrolled escalation in times of crisis. At some point in time, artificial intelligence and unmanned weapons systems without human control pose a new and unprecedented danger in this respect. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that international negotiations are launched on regimes prohibiting the production and use of weapons without human control. Secondly, NATO countries cannot only rely on EDTs to ensure the territorial integrity of the Treaty area. Investment in the ‘bang’ will still be needed, naturally taking into account changing conditions and technologies – such as the shift from short to longer distances to deliver firepower and shorter decision-cycles.






NATO's future

The history of the Alliance can be characterised as a rocky road. NATO has survived the change of time by adapting to new circumstances, both during and after the Cold War. The complexity of the current and future security environment with new and more actors involved – such as the rising world power China – and a mix of military and non-military challenges and threats could lead to a broadening of the Alliance's set of tasks. However, turning NATO into a globally operating political organisation is asking for trouble. It will undermine Alliance cohesion, bring NATO into confrontation with China and promote Sino-Russian military cooperation. Instead, NATO should stick to its strength – the most successful defensive military Alliance that has ever existed.

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