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NATO's coming existential challenge

Karl-Heinz Kamp *

Seven decades after it was established, the North Atlantic Alliance is doing fairly well and fully deserves being described as the most successful security organization in modern history. By constantly evolving and adapting, NATO managed to maintain its relevance on both sides of the Atlantic in fundamentally different security environments. It preserved the territorial integrity of its members during the Cold War and was crucial for bringing down the Iron Curtain. It helped to bring peace to the Balkans and prevented Afghanistan from once again becoming a breeding ground for jihadist terrorism. Since Russia's return to revanchist policies in 2014, NATO again guarantees the freedom and security of its members in the East.

In the long term though, NATO faces an almost existential problem, as it will be difficult to maintain its relevance for the United States as the dominant power within the Alliance. This will be less a result of the current president's erratic policy than of the geostrategic reorientation of the US away from Russia and towards China. NATO will also have to fundamentally alter its geographic orientation to avoid falling into oblivion.

Successful now and in the next couple of years

Until half a decade ago, NATO's history had often been divided into three phases (this division goes back to Michael Rühle). During its first phase, which lasted from its establishment until the end of the East-West conflict, NATO was an instrument of Western defence and self-determination against the Soviet Union. In the second phase – from 1989 to 2001 – NATO filled the power vacuum left by the bygone Warsaw Pact and supported the democratization of Eastern Europe. The third phase began with the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York and saw NATO evolving into a global security actor, fighting the Taliban thousands of kilometres away from Alliance territory. With Moscow's illegal

* Karl-Heinz Kamp was President of the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS), Berlin, when he authored this text.
This text was first published as an *NDC Policy Brief* in March 2019.

annexation of Crimea in 2014, the fourth phase of Alliance history started. Since then, NATO is back in the "Article 5 World" – a security environment in which the commitments of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty need to be bolstered by a credible deterrence and defence posture.

NATO adapted very swiftly to the new requirements of the "Article 5 World" – possibly much quicker than Vladimir Putin had expected when he launched a war against Ukraine. As a result of the milestone summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016), NATO significantly improved its readiness for territorial defence – not only in the East.[1] Numbers of the NATO Response Force (NRF), established in 2002, have increased three-fold to a joint force of some 40,000 soldiers. Its readiness has been significantly improved through reinforcement with 5,000 soldiers from the multinational Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which is on permanent standby and ready to move in a few days. Under the acronym EFP (Enhanced Forward Presence), four combat-ready battlegroups are operational since 2017 in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the US respectively. In addition to the deployment of boots on the ground, NATO has significantly increased the number and size of multinational exercises, and has developed new defence plans. Moreover, the Alliance has streamlined its decision-making processes in order to achieve an agreement on the deployment of rapid response forces within 8 to 12 hours.

Even nuclear deterrence, contested by the public in some NATO countries, has been substantially augmented. A new "nuclear mindset" has emerged among all 29 member states, leading to a broad consensus on the threat posed by Russia and on the fact that NATO remains a nuclear Alliance. Response times of NATO's nuclear aircraft have been reduced and US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe will be thoroughly modernized. Besides, nuclear exercises take place more often and the number of non-nuclear NATO members that could provide conventional support in case of an (unlikely) nuclear strike mission has been expanded.

In addition, NATO kept up all the elements of its "360-degree approach" to security, including activities to counter global terrorism or projecting stability beyond its own borders.

1 For more details see H. Brauss, *NATO beyond 70*, International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia, 2018.

The United States remain engaged

It goes without saying that NATO's success over the last seven decades crucially depended on the commitment of the United States as the ultimate and indeed "indispensable" (as former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once put it) security-provider to the European Allies. It is worth noting that US commitments have been kept up after the tidal change in 2014, and more importantly, also since 2017 when President Trump took office.

Such a positive description of the United States' role in NATO might surprise all those who point out that Washington is afflicted with a president who openly detests NATO and does not miss any opportunity to express his disrespect for alliances and allies. Trump's embarrassing performances at NATO top-level meetings are proverbial and in the meantime, there has been discussion on doing away with summit meetings, in order to avoid occurrences like those in Brussels in July 2018.

However, on closer inspection, Trump's morning tweets against America's international commitments are more a testimony of the president's ignorance of international politics than of the lack of US commitment to NATO. The opposite is true: since Donald Trump's inauguration, US commitment to NATO in Eastern Europe has even increased.

Since 2014 the United States have contributed to all "three Cs" – capabilities, contributions and cash – in the defence sector. With regard to *cash*, the Trump administration multiplied the emergency response support for Eastern European NATO members against the Russian threat. Immediately after Russia attacked Ukraine, President Obama requested USD1 billion for the fiscal year of 2015 in support of the "European Reassurance Initiative" (ERI), a military support programme. In 2016, this amount was slightly cut to USD800 million. The Trump administration quadrupled the amount to USD3.4 billion in 2017 and increased it further to 4.7 billion in 2018. For the fiscal year of 2019, USD6.5 billion have even been requested for the project which, in the meantime, was renamed to "European Deterrence Initiative" (EDI)[2].

With respect to *contributions* and *capabilities,* the US has shown its commitment to NATO by strengthening the "Eastern front" through rotational deployment of combat brigades, prepositioning weapons and ammunition on a significant scale, modernizing airfields, increasing naval capabilities in the North (particularly anti-submarine warfare) and generally improving military infrastructure. All this is constantly tested and improved by major military exercises, which have a clear deterrent effect as they signal resolve and readiness to any potential aggressor.

2 "The European deterrence initiative: a budgetary overview", Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 8 August 2018.

The resignation in December 2018 of Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, one of the last "adults" in the administration and a steadfast defender of America's international role, raised concerns that US support for NATO could dwindle. These concerns, though, underestimate the strong and bipartisan political support for NATO in the Congress in Washington, which prevents the president from implementing isolationist ideas, at least with regard to the Alliance. In order to refute presidential tweets, indicating that Trump would leave NATO if its members did not agree to what the president defines as fair burden-sharing, Congress always makes the adoption of the defence budget dependent on US commitment to NATO. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the fiscal year of 2019 explicitly mentions that US policy is to "… fulfil the ironclad commitment of the United States to its obligations under the North Atlantic Treaty … as part of a broader, long-term strategy backed by all elements of United States national power to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression".[3] This will not prevent the president from unexpectedly withdrawing US troops from the Middle East or from Afghanistan, but it will prevent him from fully wrecking the institutional framework of the European security order.

The true danger lurking

Despite concerns about the future course of the Trump administration, NATO is significantly stronger today than five years ago, when it was looking for a new *raison d'être*. There is, however, one major challenge to NATO and American engagement in Europe which lies less in the current US president's volatility than in a fundamental shift of international power distribution and a changing American worldview.

As US military improvements in Eastern Europe and Congressional statements such as the NDAA indicate, political and military support for NATO is largely based on the United States' concerns regarding Moscow. Russia is perceived as a revisionist power, ready to break international law to pursue its power ambitions. Lacking the resources to mount an open challenge to the United States, Russia uses the entire range of statecraft, including disinformation, cyber-attacks and interference with domestic elections to take action against what it perceives as the "great enemy" in the West. Moscow invests its scarce resources selectively to destabilize countries like Ukraine, to drive a wedge in alliances such as NATO or to leave a lasting footprint in the Middle East, which is clearly directed against US interests.

At the same time, there is a broad perception among US political elites of Russia

3 US Congress, John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019.

being a power in decline. The country missed decades of political, economic and societal modernization and seems already now unable to live up to its self-image as a major international player. Russia has a significantly smaller GDP than Italy, has only two competitive products on the world market (energy and weapons), while maintaining political and economic structures based on rent income and corruption instead of innovation and rule of law. The Russian armed forces might be able to attack or bully smaller neighbours, but they are hardly capable of taking decisive action on a global scale – and the situation is likely to further deteriorate as the reduction of the Russian defence budget for 2018 indicated. With its still relevant military capabilities, a huge nuclear arsenal and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, Russia will certainly always have a "nuisance capability" for the United States. However, it will be less and less able to shape international politics on a decisive scale. This does not imply that a declining Russia will be easier to handle, as it might partly disintegrate and tempt the leadership to take irrational decisions. Nevertheless, its overall power to pursue what it considers Russian interests will profoundly decline.

In contrast, China is perceived as a rising power with breathtaking economic development, which becomes increasingly translated into military capabilities. Hence, China is on its way to become a true peer to Washington, not only challenging the US role in the Pacific but also being ready to replace the United States in the international order.

The overall view of Russia being in decline and China being on the rise is more or less shared by almost all European NATO Allies. Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that both trends might differ in speed or intensity, but that they are very unlikely to be reversed. Nevertheless, NATO member states have not given a lot of thought to the consequences such developments might have for Europe in general and for the Atlantic Alliance in particular.

Europe loses relevance

If Russia is no longer perceived as a global-strategic challenge, but as a regional problem that can be contained with limited means, then Europe will lose its relevance for the United States. Extrapolating the trend of Russian decline on a five- or ten-year scale, Washington might come to the conclusion that a number of well-equipped US combat brigades stationed on a bilateral basis in Eastern Europe, added to some maritime capabilities in the High North should suffice to contain potential Russian aggression against its neighbours. NATO would hardly be needed anymore from a US viewpoint, as neither would those European Allies geographically located at a distance from the Russian border. Nor would NATO have a specific effect of nuclear deterrence on a declining Russia. Washington will

dispose of about 6,500 nuclear weapons of all kinds and – according to the latest 2018 Nuclear Posture Review – intends to procure sea-launched low-yield nuclear weapons to deter, in particular, Russian nuclear threats.

Even if NATO was not to be formally dissolved, it would become an empty shell, depending on how swiftly and how profoundly the "scenario of decline" would play out. Washington could deal with those European Allies it considers relevant in terms of bilateral relationships without having to struggle with a consensus-based organization of 29 member states. In fact, countries such as Poland have frequently aspired to privileged bilateral relations with Washington, as a US security guarantee seemed for many in Warsaw more reliable than an institutional commitment made by European states. It might also be tempting for the US to redirect the resources previously used in Europe to the Asia-Pacific region to cope with the rise of China as the true peer in the quest for global dominance and control over the international order. In that sense, Washington would put into practice those measures President Obama had announced with the "pivot to Asia" years earlier, but never fully implemented.[4]

In this new US-Chinese bilateralism, NATO could assert its relevance for the US only, if it contributed to containing China's potential global ambitions and to preventing Beijing from replacing the liberal, rules-based order (which had always been supported by the US – prior to Donald Trump) with its own concept of international relations. A NATO, which is able to contribute to deterring China, would not only be beneficial to the US but also to the European Allies. This holds all the more true as, for years, NATO has been establishing privileged partnerships with "Western" countries (the so-called "partners around the globe") in the region, such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan or South Korea.

NATO's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region could have various levels of intensity. The easiest steps would be to show more interest in the region and be closely informed about potentially critical developments. This is long overdue since European NATO members might be forced to take sides for one of the protagonists should a crisis escalate into an outright conflict.

A second level would imply greater readiness of NATO members for military burden-sharing, also with respect to Asia. If the US is the only NATO member with significant power-projection capabilities in Asia, then Europeans need to show more military engagement in their own neighbourhood to free US military capabilities for operations in areas out of reach for most NATO Allies.

In the long run, though, provided that the assumption of a fundamental international

4 See H. Binnendijk (ed.), *A Transatlantic pivot to Asia*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2014.

power shift towards a new bilateralism proves correct, major European NATO members will have to build up military – primarily naval – capabilities, to operate in the Asia-Pacific as the region of intense competition for international leadership. This would not only be necessary from the NATO side but also from the perspective of the EU with its ambitions to become a true global player.

Today, it might seem unlikely to many Alliance members that NATO could ever expand its portfolio as far as to the Asian-Pacific region. Most Europeans are still struggling with re-establishing their capabilities for territorial defence and are hardly inclined to focus on new challenges. However, fundamental political changes require fundamentally new approaches.

NATO has already demonstrated in the past how quickly it can adjust to new requirements. For decades, most European Allies claimed that NATO should never get militarily engaged in so-called "out-of-area" contingencies outside Europe and should never take any casualties – except for self-defence. After the drama of "9/11" turned international security upside down over night, NATO changed gears and managed to fight a long and bloody war in Afghanistan – 5,500 km away from Brussels. Without this ability to rapidly evolve to new security landscapes, NATO would arguably have lost its relevance with the fall of the Berlin Wall some three decades ago.