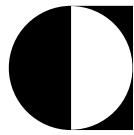




# FROM SUEZ TO SYRIA

## Why NATO Must Strengthen Its Political Role

Judy Dempsey



**CARNEGIE**  
EUROPE

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## About the Author

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She worked for the *International Herald Tribune* from 2004 to 2011 as its Germany and Eastern Europe correspondent and from 2011 to September 2013 as a columnist. Dempsey was the diplomatic correspondent for the *Financial Times* in Brussels from 2001 onward, covering NATO and European Union enlargement. Between 1990 and 2001, she served as Jerusalem bureau chief (1996–2001), Berlin correspondent (1992–1996), and Eastern Europe correspondent in London (1990–1992) for the *Financial Times*. During the 1980s, Dempsey reported on Central and Eastern Europe for the *Financial Times*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Economist*.

Dempsey graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, where she studied history and political science. She has contributed to several books on Eastern Europe, including *Developments in Central and East European Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan and Duke University Press, 2007) and *The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: A Handbook* (Frederick Muller Ltd, 1985).

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## Summary

NATO is a political organization. More than ever before, defense, security, and politics are intertwined. The alliance needs to recognize this—and does not have the luxury of time. Apart from a weakened EU, NATO faces a multitude of challenges along its Eastern and Southern flanks, in addition to terrorism and cyberattacks, energy insecurity, disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening the West, and the uncertainty of the U.S. stance following the 2016 presidential election. NATO must rise to the challenge of putting in place long-term mechanisms to protect the Euro-Atlantic community's way of life, shared values, and security.

## What Is at Stake

- New asymmetrical threats have accumulated. They have the potential to inflict irreparable damage on a transatlantic relationship that is already under immense strain. Allies have no common perception of threats.
- The rise of populist and anti-American movements across Europe, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Syria and disinformation campaigns against the West, and uncertainty following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president make the alliance vulnerable.
- The changing nature of the threats facing the alliance and the shifting requirements of defense and security call for an overhaul of the ways NATO reacts to crises—militarily and, especially, politically.

## Recommendations for NATO

- **Reinforce the alliance's political dimension.** This is more essential than ever because of the complex challenges to the West's political, security, and democratic systems—not only from Russia and the self-proclaimed Islamic State but also from the darker sides of globalization and technology, including cyberattacks. This means using the North Atlantic Council, which brings together alliance ambassadors on a weekly basis, as a regular, candid forum to discuss political issues.
- **Take resilience seriously.** Terrorist attacks, whether conventional, in cyberspace, or hybrid, damage citizens' confidence and trust in governments. NATO and governments must be able to rebuild societies



quickly in the event of major attacks that could disrupt essential infrastructure. Resilience is about defending the Western liberal order. NATO's role is crucial in this regard, provided it has the military capabilities to respond quickly to attacks.

- **Forge political bonds with the EU.** There is no time, value, or ideological advantage for NATO and the EU to compete with each other. NATO's relations with the EU are vital for strengthening the political aspects of the transatlantic relationship. The compartmentalization of military and civilian tasks is redundant.
- **Take the alliance out of its bubble.** NATO officials should leave their Brussels headquarters and travel to town halls, schools, colleges, and enterprises to explain what the alliance is about and why it is needed.

## Introduction

The 1956 *Report of the Committee of Three on Non-Military Cooperation in NATO* is a must-read.<sup>1</sup> What the foreign ministers of Canada, Italy, and Norway proposed sixty years ago is just as relevant today. The report argued that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has greatly enlarged since its establishment in 1949 from twelve to twenty-eight countries, must be prepared to talk candidly about political issues. Not doing so, the authors urged, would lead to misunderstandings and mistrust in an alliance in which big members set the agenda without taking into account the needs and opinions of smaller states.

What prompted the *Report of the Committee of Three*, also known as the Three Wise Men's report, was the Suez Crisis. On October 29, 1956, France and Britain—without consulting NATO as a whole or the United States in particular—joined forces with Israel to invade Egypt to secure the Suez Canal as an open trading and commercial route. The invasion was a political defeat for France and the United Kingdom (UK). It was also a major blow for NATO, as two of the organization's leading European members had refused to consult or cooperate with this young transatlantic alliance. As the report bluntly stated, “an Alliance in which the members ignore each other's interests or engage in political or economic conflict, or harbour suspicions of each other, cannot be effective either for deterrence or defence. Recent experience makes this clearer than ever before.”

The signal that the Suez debacle sent to the Soviet Union greatly worried the three authors of the report—Canada's Lester B. Pearson, Italy's Gaetano Martino, and Norway's Halvard Lange (see figure 1). While there was some hope of a thaw after the death in 1953 of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, the authors cautioned against complacency. “We must remember that the weakening and eventual dissolution of NATO remains a major Communist goal,” they wrote.

**Figure 1:**



*The Authors of NATO's 1956 Report of the Committee of Three (from left to right: Norwegian Foreign Minister Halvard Lange, Italian Foreign Minister Gaetano Martino, Canadian Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson).*

*Photo courtesy of NATO Archives.*

The Three Wise Men’s proposal that NATO members use the alliance for genuine consultation and cooperation on issues of common concern was not fully implemented. But the days are long gone when a NATO ambassador could believe that any member state could go its own way on defense issues or take a view of politics that is detached from the security environment. As the Three Wise Men’s report pointed out, “some states may be able to enjoy a degree of political and economic independence when things are going well. No state, however powerful, can guarantee its security and its welfare by national action alone.”

After all, as the authors insisted throughout their report, NATO is not just a military organization—it is also a political one. But the political dimension is so often sidelined. This is a mistake: at a time when defense, security, and politics are so closely intertwined, NATO needs to articulate its political side without hesitation. Yet to this day, the alliance shies away from discussing controversial issues, from speaking and acting politically, and from taking a stance.

To reinforce its political dimension and its commitment to collective defense, NATO needs to take seriously the concept of resilience, shore up its relationship with the European Union (EU), and improve communication by getting out of the alliance’s Brussels bubble. These are important political steps, the pursuit of which is crucial to make NATO fit to deal with the threats facing the Euro-Atlantic community.

## Defining a Political Role for NATO

NATO needs a clearer political role. First and foremost, that concerns the political obligation of all members to collective defense, a point that cannot be stressed enough. This obligation—enshrined in Article 5 of NATO’s founding Washington Treaty, which states that an attack on one ally is an attack on all—is NATO’s cornerstone and *raison d’être*.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is a political necessity

for all member states to reinforce this obligation in words and actions. This is because some allies, for example the Baltic states, are increasingly nervous and, at times, even doubtful about the political willingness of other members to defend them in case of an attack, most likely by Russia.

Second, NATO is going to need a great deal more political assurance from the incoming administration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump that it is committed to collective defense and, by implication, to NATO. This

commitment has to be backed by strong military capabilities—and by a rapid reaction to threats faced by member states. The ability to react rapidly is now accepted in NATO, even if the military commitment and resources to protect

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the Baltic states and Poland is far from adequate. For the moment, political commitment has become the number one priority for NATO's Eastern members.

NATO has another political role to play: ensuring resilience. All NATO members face challenges. Some have been attacked by terrorists who have caused many civilian casualties. Other NATO countries have been threatened or intimidated by Russia or have had to cope with large numbers of immigrants. Many allies must contend with the increasing negative and dangerous impacts of cyberwar, hybrid warfare, and disinformation, which have the potential to make democracies highly vulnerable. And populist movements tap into citizens' fears, which are often fueled or intensified by social media and disinformation.

Resilience, which is mentioned in NATO's founding treaty, has several aspects. Among the most important is a readiness to respond immediately if civilian or military infrastructure is attacked. This requires NATO to work politically with the EU to ensure that the continent is able to recover quickly in the event of this kind of attack or any kind of destabilization. In this case, having a political role means being prepared, developing a plan, having already conducted exercises, having worked closely with partners, and having established seamless lines of communication with all NATO member governments as well as with their relevant civilian authorities.

NATO gave resilience some prominence in the conclusions of its July 2016 summit in Warsaw. Now, resilience should become part of the alliance's strategy and culture, instead of being ad hoc. Resilience is neither exclusively military nor exclusively civilian. It spans both—that is, it is political, which is why NATO has to embrace a stronger political role. This role should not become subject to bureaucracy, committees, or endless haggling about what should be on the agenda of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's main decision-making body. Anyone who works in NATO knows how the organization can be debilitating at times and then, in rare moments, suddenly creative and flexible. Resilience means being prepared to manage and respond to crises whose responses cannot be held up by committees.

More broadly, a political role means that the alliance must become a forum for open dialogue about major issues. It must reach out to other international organizations and engage the public, including by explaining what resilience means and how it is linked to security and defense. NATO must have information and communications systems in place so that the public recognizes what is happening in the case of an attack and why action has to be taken.

A more political role for NATO is going to require a determination from the secretary general's office and from all member countries, particularly the United States. America's role must not be underestimated: Washington is the guarantor of Europe's security and the biggest financial and military contributor to NATO. It has protected Europe since 1949—and in that time, the European members of NATO have taken that protection for granted.

Trump could change that imbalance. During his election campaign, he called NATO “obsolete.”<sup>3</sup> He has since modified his views: on November 18, 2016, he spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to reaffirm the “enduring importance” of the alliance.<sup>4</sup> Whatever policies Trump adopts in office, it is clear that America’s relationship with NATO is no longer predictable. But what any U.S. administration says about NATO matters. If Washington does want to reassure its allies, the new administration should use the NAC to explain its position and begin open discussions about security challenges and political trends facing the alliance.

Discussions about political issues have to take place in the knowledge that the United States is fully committed to collective defense. If that is in any doubt, then the very existence of NATO could be called into question. As the Three Wise Men’s report stated, “the first essential . . . of a healthy and developing NATO lies in the whole-hearted acceptance by all its members of the political commitment for collective defence, and in the confidence which each has in the will and ability of the others to honour that commitment if aggression should take place.”

## Divisions Over a Political Role

During many interviews, some on the record, others not, analysts were divided over whether NATO should have a political role. One argument against such a role is that NATO should focus on ensuring collective defense and on being a military alliance. “Russia is the big threat,” said John Lough, a Russia and Eurasia expert at Chatham House. “Russia is even preparing for war. NATO is not prepared. We have one almighty problem on our hands.”<sup>5</sup> Another security expert, Roland Paris of the University of Ottawa, said, “NATO is the West’s security architecture. It already faces enough challenges and is overstretched on operational grounds. I’d be wary about taking the military dimension too far into the political realm.”<sup>6</sup>

Others say that NATO is already political—that it assumed that role in 1989 when the Berlin Wall was torn down and Europe was reunited. During the 1990s, NATO was preoccupied with ending the wars in Yugoslavia and with preparing the former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, for alliance membership. Both tasks were highly political in nature: they were about reuniting Europe.

Even so, NATO’s political role was not complete. “Since 1989, all kinds of discussions have taken place,” said Paal Hilde of the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies. “But there are limitations. Iran and Syria have not been discussed. . . . There are lots of political issues [on which NATO members] are not necessarily in agreement. As for energy security, this is a big issue [but] there is no clear role for NATO. NATO can’t do anything on the supply side. This is a political issue. . . . It would be a real challenge for NATO if our energy were cut

off,” he added.<sup>7</sup> The issue of energy security points to the broader concern of resilience. If the infrastructure of any NATO member is damaged to the extent that it could paralyze the country’s economy or harm its citizens, NATO needs to be able to react quickly to support and, if need be, defend that member state.

There are also analysts who believe that pragmatism must be the driving philosophy. In this context, they argue, NATO and the EU have to cooperate because they share the same values. NATO has a political role in articulating those values. “Look at Chapter IV of the Three Wise Men’s report,” said Luciano Bozzo of the University of Florence. “The authors write about the sense of community, of common values, of joint NATO actions. Who cares whether that should be the role of NATO or the EU? As it is, Europe is falling apart. The transatlantic relationship is under huge stress. In this regard, we need to strengthen NATO’s political role. That means defending our common cultural values and way of life. NATO can do this because it is a more efficient organization than the EU,” Bozzo added.<sup>8</sup>

Divisions over this issue are not new. NATO has always been plagued by disagreements about whether it should have a political role. “NATO’s future was assured only when the Allies demonstrated its continued vitality as a *military* instrument in a new strategic environment, dealing with non-Article 5, out-of-area contingencies,” Frédéric Bozo of the University of Nantes argued over a decade ago. “In the absence of such a demonstration, seeking to rejuvenate NATO at the time by ‘politicising’ the organisation would simply have led to the creation of a [talking] shop.”<sup>9</sup>

Another talking shop is exactly what the Three Wise Men’s report wanted to avoid, because the authors knew that it would not address the need for genuine and transparent political discussions and consultations. It was the lack of consultation and the scant regard for smaller members of the alliance before and after the Suez Crisis that threw open the question of a political role for NATO. It seemed that some allies were more equal than others and could pursue their own military agendas. As the report stated, “a member government should not, without adequate advance consultation, adopt firm policies or make major political pronouncements on matters which significantly affect the Alliance or any of its members, unless circumstances make such prior consultation obviously and demonstrably impossible.”

The Suez Crisis rocked the credibility of the alliance. It also left France and Britain with fundamentally different perceptions about the roles of the United States and NATO. “The UK learned to never leave the side of the United States. . . . The French learned to never trust the British nor rely on the Americans,” Daniel Keohane of the Center for Security Studies in Zurich has argued.<sup>10</sup> And the crisis damaged NATO unity at a time when the alliance was involved in a military and ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. The Three Wise Men’s report was published just two months after the Kremlin sent Soviet troops into Budapest to crush the anti-Communist Hungarian Uprising.

The foreign ministers who authored the report pulled no punches about the atmosphere in the alliance after the Suez Crisis. “The practice of consulting has not so developed in the NATO Council as to meet the demands of political changes and world trends,” they wrote. “The present need, therefore, is more than simply broadening the scope and deepening the character of consultation. There is a pressing requirement for all members to make consultation in NATO an integral part of the making of national policy. Without this the very existence of the North Atlantic Community may be in jeopardy. . . . There cannot be unity in defence and disunity in foreign policy.” Strong words, but did they have an enduring impact?

It seems they did not. Some NATO ambassadors and officials have argued that controversial issues, such as the wars in Iraq and Syria, Iran’s nuclear program, and Europe’s refugee crisis, have nothing to do with NATO.<sup>11</sup> They have further argued that these are issues for national leaders and foreign ministers to take care of, and not for NATO. That is sidestepping the issue.

One main reason for not wanting candid debates about such topics is the instinctive reflex that doing so would open up divisions in the alliance. Several of the big NATO countries can block honest and open discussions or have the political clout to start them. In both cases, large member states are in a much stronger position than smaller ones to set the agenda. This can have a debilitating if not demoralizing impact on smaller countries.

Furthermore, some NATO members, for example Germany and Turkey, have an instinctive fear and suspicion that once the NAC discusses political or controversial issues, there is an underlying military agenda. This worries many of the alliance’s European members.<sup>12</sup> Europeans were right to suspect this might happen in 2002 when the United States was considering ways to overthrow the then president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein. Bitter shouting matches ensued between the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns, and his French counterpart, Benoît d’Aboville.<sup>13</sup> Germany, France, and the Benelux countries, supported by Russia, which all opposed U.S. plans to invade Iraq, attempted to establish a European defense structure independent of NATO. Yet the majority of European countries were not prepared to destroy the transatlantic alliance or have Europe go it alone. It took several years to heal the wounds in NATO.

A strong political role for the alliance also helps shape strategy. In retrospect, the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War and the way the campaign was conducted should have persuaded NATO of the need for genuine political consultations, independent of a military agenda. However, the opposite happened: the war did not embolden individual NATO countries to raise other political and strategic issues, such as the disastrous aftermath of NATO’s short military operation in Libya in 2011. Nor has NATO been prepared to discuss Iran, the Sahel, Somalia, or the impact of climate change on the Euro-Atlantic community. As for the U.S. shift toward the Asia-Pacific region or tensions between the United

States and China over Beijing's efforts to control the South China Sea, NATO has been all but silent on these major political issues. This silence implies a lack of strategic thinking about whether NATO has any role to play in these fields as well as a serious lack of ambition.

## NATO's Nonpolitical Response to the Refugee Crisis

Throughout 2014 and 2015, Europe faced an inflow of refugees not seen since the end of World War II. The majority were fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq, where the self-proclaimed Islamic State had taken over parts of the countries. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants reached Europe at great risk, crossing the Western Balkans before passing through Hungary and Austria, on to Germany. The pressure on the Western Balkan countries was so great that instability and a backlash against the refugees were waiting to happen. Yet NATO remained largely on the sidelines.

The influx challenged Europe's basic principle of solidarity and exposed yet again NATO's reluctance to think politically and strategically. Indeed, it took many months for the NAC even to put the refugee crisis on its agenda. NATO members either did not believe the crisis had anything to do with the alliance or did not want to think outside the box and realize that the refugee crisis was not confined to the political and civilian realms.<sup>14</sup> There was also a consensus that this was an EU problem. In any case, the migration issue had and continues to have complex security implications for Europeans and for the transatlantic relationship.

When the refugee crisis boiled over in 2015 in a way that led to deep divisions in Europe, with some countries such as Hungary building high barbed-wire fences to keep refugees out, NATO was silent. The alliance seemed almost indifferent to a problem that had the potential to undermine the stability of some of its member countries.

Greece, for one, was under immense pressure. An EU and NATO member, it was already trying to overcome a devastating economic crisis that had shaken the foundations of the EU's single currency, the euro. Athens was forced to introduce highly unpopular austerity measures as a precondition for receiving financial assistance. At the same time, it had to cope with tens of thousands of refugees landing on its islands or reaching the Greek mainland in the hope of moving on to other EU countries. Turkey, a leading NATO member and an EU candidate country, was under pressure too, sheltering over 2 million Syrian refugees as of October 2015.<sup>15</sup>

Stoltenberg wanted the alliance to play some kind of political and civilian role in helping the refugees, but he knew that reaching consensus in the

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NAC to involve NATO would be difficult.<sup>16</sup> This was despite the fact that the organization has a toolbox to deal with such civilian crises. The alliance has a Civil Emergency Planning Committee, and its role is unambiguous. According to the committee's website, "Civil Emergency Planning provides NATO with essential civilian expertise and capabilities in the fields of terrorism preparedness . . . humanitarian and disaster response and protecting critical infrastructure."<sup>17</sup>

The alliance also has a Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center based at its headquarters in Brussels. The center is meant to cooperate with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other international agencies. This center was not involved during the thick of the refugee crisis.

And NATO has a Civil Emergency Planning Rapid Reaction Team, which is designed to evaluate civilian requirements and capabilities to support a NATO operation or an emergency situation such as the Western Balkans were facing during the refugee crisis. Again, there was no evidence of the rapid reaction team being activated.<sup>18</sup> "There was no political will to ask how NATO could get involved in some way, even though Stoltenberg at times felt very frustrated about NATO's lack of response," an alliance diplomat said off the record because he was not authorized to discuss the issue publicly. The diplomat added that NATO should have used its civilian toolbox to help deal with the refugee crisis.<sup>19</sup>

The unremitting flow of refugees passing through or stranded along the Western Balkan route required a special response. Because the civilian, security, and armed forces in these countries were (and still are) poorly equipped and trained to deal with such emergencies, NATO could have compensated for these shortfalls in several ways. The alliance could have assisted in bringing order and security to the borders. Such assistance could have comprised logistics and personnel to provide stability for the authorities and safety for the refugees. The alliance could also have provided emergency facilities such as housing and field hospitals. It could have worked with the overstretched Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help register refugees and issue them with identity papers. And NATO could have offered transportation to take refugees to other countries in Europe. In retrospect, because Western Balkan states and Greece were struggling to cope, they should have called in NATO to help. Greece, as a member state, was certainly entitled to do so—as was Turkey.

NATO did not deploy its tools, because doing so would have meant giving the alliance a political role. But the enormous scale of the challenge made it a political task. Again, there was a cultural reflex in NATO that once an issue was discussed from a political point of view, it was assumed to have military ramifications. In addition, some members wanted to believe that the EU would be able to deal with the crisis—although it was clear from early on that the

bloc was not equipped to cope with security issues, border management, or humanitarian questions. This is where NATO's political role could have made a difference: it would have been tangible and would have had an impact.

A NATO role in helping deal with the refugee crisis in the Western Balkans, Greece, and Turkey, apart from reducing the immense strain on these countries, could have improved NATO's image and demonstrated that it was not merely a military organization. It would have shown that NATO could project stability and assistance and could help manage a crisis. That is what the allies agreed to do at their July 2016 summit in Warsaw: "The Alliance must and will continue fulfilling effectively all three core tasks as set out in the Strategic Concept: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. These tasks remain fully relevant, are complementary, and contribute to safeguarding the freedom and security of all Allies."<sup>20</sup>

In the end, in February 2016, after requests by Germany, Greece, and Turkey, NATO decided to join international efforts to deal with the refugee crisis.<sup>21</sup> NATO ships are now trying to stop illegal trafficking and irregular migration in the Aegean Sea through intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance at the Turkish-Syrian border. And in a sign of cooperation with the EU, NATO is liaising with the union's border management agency, Frontex, which is now attempting to secure the EU's external frontiers. NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, which is deployed in the Mediterranean to perform a range of maritime security tasks, will support the EU-led mission EUNAVFOR Med, also known as Operation Sophia.

## The Limits of Being a Nonpolitical Player

Was NATO's decision to assist the EU in dealing with the refugee crisis too little, too late? It was certainly late. But at least the alliance realized that defense, security, and political roles overlapped.

Some NATO ambassadors believe the alliance's efforts in the Aegean Sea are still inadequate and that NATO's overall role in reacting to the crisis in the Middle East has been woefully lacking. But Turkey was very reluctant to support a stronger role for NATO. Ankara did not want the alliance snooping around in the country, fearing that it would share any information or insights with Greece or the EU.

One top NATO official said at a private dinner, "In the South, we face the infamous 'ring of fire' of terrorism, instability, radicalization, failing states, and ungoverned spaces—as well as the spillover threats of illegal migration and homegrown terrorists. Yet the actions we are taking are painfully modest and under-resourced—in large part because many allies want to limit NATO's level of ambition to that of a niche player."<sup>22</sup> Being a niche player would mean focusing primarily on defense and circumscribing NATO's role.

As it is, NATO's role has already been circumscribed. The alliance has been a nonentity during the Syrian conflict that began in 2011. And with the exception of providing airborne warning and control systems (AWACS), it has been entirely absent in the military campaign against the Islamic State. Unless NATO can adopt a more political posture, it will continue to be sidelined in such security crises that require a political as well as a military response. The alliance's usefulness could be called into question.

NATO's limited role in the Middle East and North Africa stems from past experience and the fact that most NATO members, including France and Italy, do not want the alliance to play a role there. Most notable was NATO's 2011 military operation in Libya, which left the alliance with little political will or appetite to embark on another mission in the region.

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This operation did little for NATO's reputation as a cohesive military or political organization. The mission in Libya was steered by Britain and France—with the United States leading from behind but in reality providing intelligence and logistics—and less than a dozen NATO members participated. Germany even abstained from a United Nations Security Council resolution to create

a no-fly zone over Libya. While Berlin played no role in that NATO mission, other countries, such as Poland, hid behind Germany. Like Berlin, they were not convinced about the wisdom of the mission. When the operation began, it soon became obvious that the European allies were ill-equipped, too few in number, and too reliant on air power. They also shifted their mandate from a noble remit with United Nations support based on the responsibility to protect to effective regime change.

Furthermore, after the Libya mission, NATO held no thorough political discussion and conducted no strategic analysis of what its operation in the country had sought to achieve, why it had developed no postmission contingency plans, and why Libya descended into anarchy. One NATO official said the alliance did not bother to prepare any postmission scenario because it was assumed the Libyans would manage their country's stability.<sup>23</sup> Admitting shortcomings, it seems, is not part of NATO's culture.

As a result, when it came to playing a military or political role during the early stages of the war in Syria, NATO preferred to keep mute. Former UK prime minister David Cameron, who had considered imposing a no-fly zone over Syria, was prevented from doing so by a vote in the British parliament. France then got cold feet. As for U.S. President Barack Obama, even though he is commander in chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, he deferred to Congress on possible American military involvement in Syria. The legislature rejected any such engagement.

And Russia was not going to do the United States or its European allies any favors, either in the United Nations Security Council or on the ground in Syria. Moscow was using—and continues to use—all military means possible to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power. Russia seeks to revive its status as a major military and political player in the Middle East and use the vacuum created by other international players to compete with the United States. As for NATO's role, it was conditioned by Washington, London, and Paris. NATO, either as a coalition of the willing or as a whole alliance, was not going to become involved in the Syrian war. The Europeans were completely against any involvement.

NATO's nonrole in the Middle East raises the issue of a niche role for the alliance. Even if NATO had the ambition only to be a niche player, and if that niche presupposed a military role, then the alliance would still have to work hard to push all members into taking the collective defense of its members more seriously than in the past.

What is more, circumscribing NATO's role would not overcome the problem that the alliance lacks a shared perception of threats. As Bozzo said, "the Baltic states and some of the Central European NATO members see the threat coming from Russia; then you have the Southern members, who see the threat coming from the Middle East. Then you have different member states putting terrorism as the number one threat, not to mention failing states, which are another threat."<sup>24</sup> The fact that one group of countries has one perception of threats while another group has a different perception is understandable given allies' varying geographies and histories. Yet it is also a barrier to collective action. The big question is how the alliance prioritizes challenges and what the lack of a common threat perception means for effective deterrence.

Moreover, the logic of limiting NATO's ambitions to those of a niche player is that the alliance should make that niche credible by spending more on defense and by improving interoperability. The low level of interoperability is a serious weakness both among European members of NATO and between Europe and the United States. Interoperability does not only mean making different military capabilities work together. It also involves setting up a platform for sharing intelligence, having a common cultural perspective, and developing a shared perception of how to deal with threats. The weakness of NATO's interoperability, particularly intelligence sharing, damages the alliance's political cohesiveness and political role. Some allies have access to intelligence that they do not share with other member states because trust is lacking. This is another factor that prevents NATO from playing a stronger political role. But that should not be a reason for allies to refrain from being more open when it comes to discussing political issues and consulting each other in a more systematic manner.

## Forging Political Bonds With the EU

Given the increasing complexities of and overlaps between security, defense, and politics, ambitions to be a niche player seem almost anachronistic. NATO's relations with the EU are crucial for strengthening the political aspects of the transatlantic relationship. For one thing, fostering closer NATO-EU ties would get the alliance out of its niche by making allies think about embracing the political implications of security. It may also nudge EU member states out of their niche role of soft power.

Even though NATO is a military organization, its leaders do not automatically assume that its members—particularly many of its European members—support hard power. This is one the cruxes of the alliance: If NATO's European members are ambiguous about hard power, how can the alliance explain politically its commitment to collective defense?

After all, collective defense means accepting the use of hard power. Today's defense and security challenges should transcend traditional responses in which NATO performs hard-power tasks and the EU takes on soft-power tasks. A

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**Today's defense and security challenges should transcend traditional responses in which NATO performs hard-power tasks and the EU takes on soft-power tasks.**

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more harmonized approach is needed because the two organizations face the same threats: cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, terrorism, and energy insecurity. They must also deal with the negative impacts of climate change and the ways in which weak or failing states breed instability, encourage migration, and allow radical movements to take advantage of weak institutions.

### Unfinished Business in the Western Balkans

NATO and the EU are now placing much emphasis on stabilization and resilience. So far, the alliance has not spelled out in detail the political ramifications of these priorities. But NATO's involvement in the Western Balkans demonstrates that the alliance has managed to combine military and political roles, while the EU has underperformed in the region.<sup>25</sup>

But there is unfinished business in the Western Balkans. Seventeen years after NATO bombed Serbian targets to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, the alliance is still in Kosovo maintaining stability. Back in 1999, NATO tackled a political issue head-on. The operation was pushed by Britain and the United States, with support from Germany, whose foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, played a pivotal (and moral) role in shifting Germany's deeply rooted pacifist stance.

Leaders realized what was at stake both for the alliance and for Europe's own backyard: the mission was important to end the war and bring stability to a region torn apart by appalling violence, ethnic cleansing, and religious strife. It was about taking a stand. NATO could not turn a blind eye to its

responsibilities as a military and political organization, as former British prime minister Tony Blair often spoke about. And because the EU was politically divided over the wars in Yugoslavia—besides having insufficient military capabilities even to consider a mission—NATO, for moral, political, and security reasons, had to intervene, as it had done in Bosnia and Herzegovina a few years earlier.

The fact that NATO troops are still in Kosovo confirms the alliance's commitment to maintaining stability there. It also highlights the EU's inability to lead a military mission. One reason for that inability is that the EU is divided over recognizing Kosovo as an independent state: Spain, among other EU countries, has refused to recognize Kosovo's independence. Even the EU's much-acclaimed rule-of-law mission known as EULEX has been riven with corruption scandals and overall inefficiency.<sup>26</sup> The lack of recognition, which is almost replicated in NATO, inevitably weakens the EU's role and credibility in Kosovo. The reality is that NATO's role in Kosovo has doubled up as both a military and a political mission by maintaining peace and political stability.

Yet throughout the Western Balkans, stability cannot be taken for granted. Local political elites and oligarchs are putting a brake on political and economic reforms. The results are rising unemployment and growing frustration among young people with unreceptive and often-corrupt governments. The EU's shortcomings play into this deteriorating situation. The union has been too timid in confronting the ruling elites, while its soft-power instruments—from financial and development assistance to institution building—are underused or inappropriately targeted.<sup>27</sup> Against this deteriorating background, NATO could play a much more effective role. Otherwise, Russia will exploit the region's security vacuum, and its influence will increase, as is already the case in Serbia, where in November 2016 Moscow held joint military exercises with Belgrade. NATO risks letting go the opportunity of making Europe whole and united.

NATO and the EU also risk squandering their instruments of hard and soft power and their ability to manage crises in effective ways that can complement each other. The challenges facing the transatlantic relationship put paid to the days when one patch belonged to NATO and another to the EU.

These challenges also show why NATO needs a strong political role. And greater cooperation between NATO and the EU might be the catalyst for the alliance to be more open about political issues, instead of the member states competing with each other, holding back on transparency, or blocking a consensus to discuss political and strategic issues.

### **A Rapprochement Between NATO and the EU?**

The EU and NATO have overlapping memberships—twenty-two countries are members of both organizations—so there should be common grounds for working together. Still, it took a number of major crises in and around Europe

to jolt the union and the alliance out of their respective fiefdoms. They now increasingly see the need to work more closely together.

On July 8, 2016, Stoltenberg, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, and European Council President Donald Tusk finally signaled cooperation. They announced in a joint statement at the NATO summit in Warsaw that “today, the Euro-Atlantic community is facing unprecedented challenges emanating from the South and East.” They declared,

Our citizens demand that we use all ways and means available to address these challenges so as to enhance their security. . . . In light of the common challenges we are now confronting, we have to step-up our efforts: we need new ways of working together and a new level of ambition; because our security is interconnected; because together we can mobilize a broad range of tools to respond to the challenges we face; and because we have to make the most efficient use of resources. A strong NATO and a stronger EU are mutually reinforcing. Together they can better provide security in Europe and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

After signing the joint NATO-EU declaration, Tusk said, “Today, the EU and NATO face the same threats, whether they come from the East or the South, or indeed from within, in the form of challenges to . . . liberal democratic values.” He added that in this new reality, “our citizens are demanding greater security, no matter whether they live in countries belonging to the EU, to NATO or to both. It is our democratic responsibility as leaders to deliver.”<sup>29</sup>

Joint declarations are the easy part. In the early 2000s, both organizations signed up to the Berlin Plus agreement, which established a structure to give the EU access to NATO’s military assets.<sup>30</sup> But those arrangements have been fraught with difficulties. Different cultures, rivalries, and doses of thickheadedness between the two organizations have prevented them from cooperating in a systematic and sustained way. Essentially, cooperation has been held up by a continuing dispute between EU but non-NATO country Cyprus, which is divided between Greek- and Turkish-speaking Cypriots, and NATO but non-EU country Turkey.<sup>31</sup>

Even so, the July 2016 agreement is important. The EU and NATO cannot afford to ignore each other in dealing with the multitude of challenges they face, given their complementary expertise. Despite increasing calls—some rhetorical or purely opportunistic—for the EU to have its own army, that is not going to materialize in the near future. (NATO does not have its own standing army, either.) There is as yet no political will from EU member states to cede sovereignty over something as important as the armed forces. Nor do EU countries, fortunately, have the political will to duplicate defense spending. If they did duplicate, then NATO’s European pillar would be much stronger. That pillar has remained weak because Europeans have not taken defense and security seriously. But duplication is not the way forward.

As it is, more NATO countries are beginning to spend more on defense, although only a handful of them have reached NATO’s goal for each ally to

spend 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. If NATO as a whole spent more—and wisely—on defense, that could give the alliance the confidence but also the justification to play a bigger political role. For those countries that have invested in defense—France, the UK, and the United States—military and political roles have often complemented each other.

When it comes to NATO-EU cooperation, the issue of hard power is important, too. There is still no political will among EU member states (or among NATO's European members) to internalize the need for hard power, which is required for resilience and stabilization. This is an issue European leaders cannot duck. It is a question of asking how Europeans—whether they are NATO or EU members—can increase the security of their citizens, protect their borders, and be resilient in dealing with crises that could endanger the infrastructure of Europe and North America and even destabilize certain countries.

There is, for example, an increasing awareness of the need to protect nuclear energy plants, airports, railroad networks, and the security of telecommunications and the Internet. Disruptions in these domains have the potential to bring economies to a standstill and instill fear in citizens. This is where the EU-NATO agreement could make a difference in providing a special kind of deterrence.

The accord could have a big political advantage, too. Each organization has its own cultural and political mind-set, as do all multinational organizations. NATO's mind-set—its niche military role—might be challenged if the alliance cooperated more closely with the EU. NATO could be stretched to discuss issues politically without the assumption that there is an ulterior military motive. The need for NATO to avoid considering only military choices was a point made by the Three Wise Men, who pointed out that security is not exclusively military. As their report stated, “these two aspects of security – civil and military – can no longer safely be considered in watertight compartments, either within or between nations.”

Perhaps NATO has not yet fully recognized the essential relationship between its civilian and military sides or done enough to bring about close and continuous contact between the two, which is essential if that relationship is to be strong and enduring. It was precisely this compartmentalization that hindered NATO from reacting quickly to Europe's refugee crisis. Because the EU is essentially a civilian organization with defense ambitions, dialogue between the union and the alliance could benefit both, given their vastly different experiences in the military, security, and civilian fields.

The two organizations do not have the luxury of time. Russia is exploiting divisions in the EU through a panoply of tools—cyberattacks, disinformation, and hybrid warfare—that are designed to discredit the transatlantic alliance, sow confusion, and prevent a strong response. These moves are also aimed at undermining the international rules-based community. This is why resilience matters. Julian Lindley-French of the Atlantic Treaty Association spelled out



how NATO and the EU should respond to Russia: “Forge a new Resiliency Pact between NATO and the EU to render European society more robust in preventing Moscow’s efforts to divide and distract.”<sup>32</sup> (The Three Wise Men’s report made no reference to the EU because the union’s precursor, the European Economic Community, was not established until 1958.)

If NATO is serious about resilience, it will not only need the resources to follow through with this commitment. The alliance is also going to require a serious political component, precisely because resilience is about reassuring civilian

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populations, getting infrastructure up and running as fast as possible, and providing security and safety. The big question is whether NATO and the EU are really equipped for resilience. Cooperation between the two organizations is vital to make their civilian and military toolboxes dovetail in a way they have often failed to do in the past. Cooperation could encourage NATO to think and act politically.

There are geostrategic considerations as well. EU-NATO cooperation could make it harder for Russia to divide Europe and damage the transatlantic relationship. Moscow’s interference in Ukraine has partly backfired in several ways. It has spurred NATO into taking measures to defend its Eastern members.<sup>33</sup> It has brought Finland and Sweden, which are members of the EU but not of NATO, much closer to the alliance. And the EU, thanks to the leadership of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, imposed sanctions on Russia—no easy feat in a bloc that has several leaders who are sympathetic toward the Kremlin. Slowly, NATO and the EU have begun to understand the implications of Russia’s information and cyberwar, although, as Lindley-French argued, both organizations have been slow to counter such measures.<sup>34</sup>

As for putting substance on the EU-NATO accord, Stoltenberg said the two organizations had agreed on a timetable for coordinating exercises. They would aim to promote a stronger defense industry and boost defense research and industrial cooperation in Europe and across the Atlantic. It was clear from the joint declaration that the leaders of the EU institutions and of NATO were committed to making this accord work. “Speedy implementation is essential,” it stated.<sup>35</sup> But nothing is speedy in either organization.

There are many details to be worked out. Intelligence sharing between NATO and the EU is highly problematic because the union has limited experience in this field—in practice, it works more on a bilateral basis than at the EU level—while in NATO, not all allies are trusted when it comes to sharing classified information. Both organizations also have to set up formal communications structures, which seem to be taking shape, albeit slowly. As Tusk said, “sometimes it seems as if the EU and NATO were on two different planets, and not headquartered in the same city.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet if NATO is to assume a political role, the planets will have to align in some way. NATO-EU cooperation will function and flourish only if the alliance steps out of its niche role. This is a question of communicating better. NATO needs to reach out to a broader public to explain why and how the two organizations can and should cooperate. The alliance must explain why it should have a political role in protecting its members—and not to the cognoscenti but to schools and institutions outside NATO's bubble in Brussels. And NATO needs to change its public relations mind-set by conducting town-hall meetings and sessions outside member states' capitals.

## A More Political Role for NATO After Brexit?

Britain's June 23, 2016, decision to leave the EU has several implications for both NATO and the union.

In NATO, Brexit will upset the balance between EU and non-EU countries. Over 80 percent of NATO's defense spending comes from five member states that are either outside or soon to be outside the EU: Britain, Canada, Norway, Turkey, and the United States.<sup>37</sup> They all carry clout, although Britain's role as a military power has been severely weakened by several years of deep cuts in defense spending.

Some NATO officials have suggested that Brexit could profoundly affect the political dynamics in the alliance. Chris Donnelly, a veteran NATO expert, made the point that "it will require a much greater investment of political effort and resources to strengthen the UK's position within [NATO's headquarters]. The recent serious reduction of UK military power has also weakened the UK's standing in NATO, in particular as [British resources] are no longer seen as . . . such a credible independent asset by the US as was the case in times past."<sup>38</sup>

As for the impact on the EU, one view is that Brexit will leave the union much weaker in terms of military capabilities. The UK's departure could mean that the EU will have a less inclusive and therefore less effective voice when it comes to European political matters. This would have an effect on the bloc's future missions, whether peacekeeping or crisis management. Brexit will also rob the union of a strong Atlanticist voice.

The other view is that after Brexit, the EU will finally be able to move ahead in establishing defense and security policies that can allow the union to act autonomously, because Britain was never a great supporter of such a plan. That would not mean that the EU would compete with NATO or duplicate resources, as neither would make sense. Rather, the EU would be free to take a hard look at how it wants to develop a strategy for security and defense.

In particular, France will become the most militarily powerful country in the EU after Brexit and will be in a much stronger position to shape the EU's future security and defense policies. Until now, Britain (and other EU countries, including Germany) has put a brake on France's ambitions to lead the

EU's common foreign and defense policies and calls for the EU to have a more independent defense policy. With Britain on the way out of the EU, France may seize that advantage. But even France's leaders know that its European allies, whether they belong to NATO or not, do not currently have the defense capabilities to project political power and strategic influence.

Whatever the impact of Brexit on the EU, it could be a chance for NATO to use the new constellation in the alliance politically, as the EU is distracted by a plethora of crises and weakened, for the moment, by the UK vote. In the EU, Britain has supported enlargement, particularly for countries in the Western Balkans. London has taken a hard line on Russia's role in Ukraine. There is no reason why Britain cannot carry over these political and strategic issues to NATO.

But there is also no doubt that the UK's political role in NATO would have more credibility with the United States if British Prime Minister Theresa May began to invest in Britain's armed forces. With the UK as a member of the EU and seen as America's special partner, the United States began in the early 2000s to encourage the EU to strengthen its security and defense instruments. U.S. leaders could rely on Britain—supported by the Central Europeans and the Balts—to push Europe in this direction, provided it did not undermine the transatlantic alliance. Now, policy-makers in Washington see how the Brexit vote may

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have weakened the EU's military capabilities, the transatlantic link in the EU, and the EU's ambitions to forge stronger common, foreign, and defense policies—unless the leaders of the EU institutions seize Brexit as an opportunity to push forward with closer integration.

Given the EU's weakness, the United States could and should use NATO as a political platform. As Britain's role changes, the United States and NATO as a whole could use the UK as a bridge between the alliance and the EU—although the real extent of the British-U.S. special relationship and Britain's desire to play that role are questionable. Yet the transatlantic relationship cannot afford to weaken at a time when it needs military and political strength and unity of purpose to deal with Europe's Eastern and Southern neighborhoods. On both counts, the political role of NATO has been inconsistent.

## **Skirting the Issues: The United States and NATO**

The U.S.-NATO relationship has taken many twists and turns since the end of the Cold War. But in many cases, joint action—or the lack of it—has demonstrated why NATO has to assume a political role.

In the future, this role will depend in part on the new U.S. president's commitment to Europe. The outgoing Obama administration homed in on reassuring the Balts and Poles that collective defense and solidarity were sacrosanct to the alliance, in addition to deploying NATO troops in the organization's Eastern members (although not on a permanent basis). The message Washington wanted to convey to Russia was that NATO would come to the defense of its members. Is Trump going to fully embrace NATO, reaffirm it as a credible and durable transatlantic alliance, and commit the United States to collective defense? Or will he use NATO to establish convenient coalitions of the willing? The two are not mutually exclusive. But if there is any wavering regarding the U.S. commitment to collective defense, the idea of NATO turning into a coalition of the willing without a cast-iron guarantee of mutual security from Washington would put an end to the NATO that was established in 1949.

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, there were times when Trump criticized the European members of NATO for not spending enough on defense. He accused them of taking the United States for granted when it came to the security guarantees that Washington has unflinchingly given to Europe. He even suggested that the United States should wash its hands of NATO. He called the Europeans free riders.<sup>39</sup>

There is much truth in this criticism. Europeans have become so dependent on the United States that they have assumed they do not need to spend more on defense and carry more of the burden for their security. Threat perceptions in the alliance have played a role, too. Governments spend when they are threatened. If perceptions do not drive a response from politicians, then defense spending is unlikely to increase. That is why the September 2014 NATO summit in Wales, held just a few months after Russia annexed Crimea and invaded parts of eastern Ukraine, was important. All leaders recommitted to meeting the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense.<sup>40</sup>

As the threats on NATO's Eastern and Southern flanks are increasing, it should become easier for NATO members to explain to their publics both the political and the military reasons for defense expenditure. The problem is that NATO is not using these threats to reach out to a wider public. It is all very well for the top brass in the alliance to write worthy opinion pieces, give interviews, and attend security conferences. But that is not reaching out in a political way. To do that, NATO leaders must engage pro- and anti-NATO movements in public debates and stand up for the values NATO purports to uphold and defend. Communicating in this way is not primarily about trying to convince the public why more should be spent on defense. It is about explaining what NATO means as a political organization and how the alliance

has to be politically ready to protect its citizens against a range of threats, including terrorist attacks.

That is where the United States, if it is committed to NATO, should take center stage in promoting the alliance's political values. If not, NATO's penchant for remaining in the bubble will make it harder for the organization to take on a political role.

Three conflicts in the past two decades highlight the difficulties of the long-standing U.S. commitment to NATO: the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

### **The Kosovo War**

The decision by NATO to bomb Serbian targets in 1999 ended almost a decade of war in Yugoslavia. This was the second time since its establishment in 1949 that NATO became involved in a military campaign; the first was in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. The episode in Kosovo changed the U.S. perception of NATO.

European input on Kosovo shocked the American security establishment. Washington was dismayed by the Europeans' lack of essential military capabilities such as logistics and intelligence and clear lines of command and control.<sup>41</sup> The Americans were also struck by the inefficiency of NATO, the endless debates, and the immense difficulties in reaching consensus.

"The United States no longer sees NATO as the institution of choice for conducting military operations, even under US command," Bozo argued in 2005.<sup>42</sup> The conduct of the Kosovo campaign was an experience that the U.S. military did not want repeated. "The way in which Washington shunned Allied offers of support during the Afghan campaign in autumn 2001 confirmed this state of affairs," Bozo added.

Discussions in NATO about whether or not to bomb Serbian targets revealed fundamental political differences between the allies over how to end the war in Yugoslavia. The debates also revealed just how partisan several NATO countries were. There was no united political view in the alliance. Even if NATO had wanted to play a political role, it could not: it was too divided.

France was strongly pro-Serb and disliked Serbian targets being bombed. Germany was split: the Green party, which was the junior partner in the Social Democrat-led coalition, was torn between its pacifist wing and calls from Fischer for the use of force on moral grounds and for Germany to start taking responsibility for the security of the region. Greece was traditionally pro-Serb but eventually supported the NATO mission because Athens did not want a huge influx of ethnic Albanian refugees. Italy was divided. It was left to Javier Solana, NATO's secretary general at the time, to keep NATO together and win consensus for bombing Serbia.

Wesley Clark, who was supreme allied commander Europe from 1997 to 2000, wrote in his memoirs, "There were many horses pulling the wagon of

Allied cohesion on the air campaign, [and] close continuous communications were maintained by heads of governments, foreign ministers and defense ministers.” Ensuring NATO cohesion “was the most crucial decision of the campaign and one of its most important lessons, for it preserved Allied unity and gave to each member of NATO an unavoidable responsibility for the outcome. That makes it a true Allied pattern for the future.”<sup>43</sup> The 2003 Iraq War was to disprove that.

The Kosovo War was a missed opportunity for NATO to address its shortcomings from a political point of view. The operation was led by the United States, and Washington should have pushed the Europeans into a major and long-overdue assessment of their political as well as military shortcomings. That did not happen.

### The War in Afghanistan

The Kosovo experience affected America’s response to NATO’s offer of help immediately after 9/11. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon led NATO to invoke Article 5. In 2003, after taking over the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, NATO embarked on what was in retrospect a highly risky but ambitious mission. This out-of-area military mission, which ended only in December 2014 (to be replaced by a training operation), gave NATO a new and different sense of purpose from the one it had had since the end of the Cold War.

Yet the political implications of a mission so far from Europe were rarely discussed. Despite the casualties, there were few if any debates over the way the intervention changed from being a stabilization and crisis-management mission to a full-fledged military operation.<sup>44</sup> Neither NATO as an organization nor the member states explained to their publics the point of the mission, even though the publics wanted to know why their soldiers were in Afghanistan. Former German defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg recalled how he had been constantly bombarded with political questions about the Afghan mission by locals in his constituency in Bavaria. “People wanted to know why our soldiers were serving there, so faraway from Europe,” he said. “But for several years, the German government and parliament preferred to play down the mission.”<sup>45</sup>

Today, as the Taliban and the Islamic State fight to win control over parts of Afghanistan, NATO is still reluctant to discuss the military and political ramifications of its role in that country. The alliance does not refer to the failure of its long military mission there. Yet at every NATO summit, the issue of Afghanistan now figures highly in the conclusions. The Afghan mission proved that NATO as an alliance could keep together as a military organization over

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those fourteen years. But the military component was not matched by a political dimension. For example, despite lasting so long, the mission did not lead to a culture of intelligence sharing, nor did it result in improved political interoperability. These are important political shortcomings, because intelligence sharing and interoperability are necessary to weld the alliance together.

### **The Iraq War**

The war in Iraq that began in 2003 changed NATO from a collective alliance into a coalition of the willing operating outside NATO. Despite major reservations about the Europeans having the military capability and political will to use hard power, the administration of then U.S. president George W. Bush had wanted NATO to give Washington the broadest cover of support for the war. The president was not going to achieve that. Washington had no choice but to opt for coalitions of the willing, given the deep divisions in NATO and the EU over the U.S. decision to go to war without a United Nations mandate and serious doubts among several allies about whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Coalitions of the willing have practical aspects. If some countries do not want to join a mission, why should they? But the arrangements also have negative spin-offs. They dilute the alliance's sense of solidarity. They also build up resentment among those countries that participate in a mission, because they have to carry the financial costs—not to mention the risks to their soldiers. In other words, the present setup that costs lie where they fall creates imbalances, if not a sense of unfairness, in NATO. That is why coalitions of the willing have to be reconciled with maintaining cohesion and solidarity in the alliance. One way to do so would be for those allies that do not join a mission to contribute financially to it. There should be more common funding.

Political discussions and consultations among allies—whether formal or informal, whether they involve ambassadors or military staff—will not stop coalitions of the willing. But they might clarify the position of each member state about its reasons for joining or not joining such a coalition.

## **Responding to Russian Aggression**

NATO response to Russia's March 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula and subsequent invasion of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine has been a mixture of reassurance for its Eastern European allies and limited deterrence. NATO has reinforced the Baltic states' airspace and is carrying out military exercises in its Eastern and Central European members and in Southeast Europe. The alliance also has so-called force integration units, which consist of small headquarters to serve as trip wires allowing for quick reinforcements via the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). These units are aimed

at reassuring the countries concerned that NATO's collective defense pledge will be honored, although one wonders whether this is more a symbolic move than real deterrence. NATO is prepared to deploy troops within a few days in the case of an attack—a promise that has yet to be tested, however. And the commitment made at the NATO summits in Wales in September 2014 and in Warsaw in July 2016 to roll out a Readiness Action Plan to ensure the alliance can respond to new security challenges is making headway.<sup>46</sup>

But frankly, it is hard to find any military officer or expert who believes that the number of troops deployed by NATO in the Baltic states—5,000—would deter Russian aggression.<sup>47</sup> These brigade-sized multinational battalions will not be permanently deployed there. They will be based on a rotation system, largely to please those allies, particularly France and Germany, that did not want to provoke Russia—as if the West provoked Russia into annexing Crimea and occupying the Donbas.

The VJTF reveals NATO's highly cautious view of collective deterrence, which, if tested, would not be able to withstand a Russian attack. This approach to deterrence is further weakened by NATO's lack of a common threat perception. This is astonishing given Russia's interference in Ukraine and its military intervention in Syria. Russia's actions affect the Southern flank of NATO as much as its Eastern flank.

This is all the more reason for NATO to open up the deterrence issue to a major political discussion of how the alliance should deal with Russia. It is all very well for NATO to repeat that it does not want a conflict with Russia or that everything it has been doing along its Eastern flank is carried out with maximum transparency. The point is that NATO needs a thorough discussion of its short- and long-term strategies vis-à-vis Russia. That discussion cannot be selective. It has to include NATO's antiballistic missile program and the future of its intermediate-range nuclear weapons systems, which are based in Europe. NATO should have a comprehensive debate to thrash out what kind of relationship it wants with Russia. The alliance needs a political approach, supported by all the member states, to deal with Russia's cyberwarfare against not only the Baltic states but also Western European countries. And NATO needs a political discussion of the issue of resilience.

All the above are difficult topics, especially so long as Russian President Vladimir Putin is in power. But none of them should provide NATO with an excuse to skirt political discussions. After all, these discussions are about consulting, strategizing, and avoiding misunderstandings between alliance members. Such deliberations, which would feed into a new strategic doctrine, are long overdue, as Russian aggression in Ukraine and the wars in Syria and Iraq confirm.

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## The Enlargement Question

Another big political issue that looms over NATO member states is enlargement—especially to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Enlargement is a permanent feature of the alliance’s summit conclusions. But somehow, NATO’s mantra of creating a Europe whole and free often sounds hollow, if not insincere.

Because of Russia’s aggression in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine six years later, one might think that NATO allies would unanimously agree on the need for the alliance to do as much as possible not only to project stability along its Eastern borders but also to eventually have Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine become members of the alliance. But that is not the case. NATO does not want

to inherit border disputes, precisely because they are bound to lead to conflicts.

Political and military considerations also come into play. Germany and France—with other countries hiding behind them—argue that now is not the time to antagonize Russia by admitting these countries.

What these NATO countries really mean to ask is whether the alliance would be prepared to defend Georgia as a NATO member if it were attacked by Russia.

Some NATO diplomats have argued that the more NATO procrastinates over admitting Georgia, the more Russia will see this as a weakness and a vindication of its policies of recognition and support for Georgia’s breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One senior NATO diplomat said, “Endless procrastination will only embolden Russia further to bully its neighbors and try to restore the [Soviet Union] *de facto* if not *de jure*. Our own credibility could take a major hit.”<sup>48</sup>

Yet a French or German diplomat would challenge that view by arguing that because Georgia is not in NATO, it has no claim to NATO protection. In short, the pledge made by the alliance at its Bucharest summit in 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would one day become members of NATO will have to be honored eventually, especially if they meet all the standards for joining NATO.<sup>49</sup> As it is, the pledge keeps coming back to haunt the alliance.

NATO has not had a political discussion about the future status of its Eastern neighbors. Moreover, given that NATO prides itself on being an alliance anchored on democracy and values, with a commitment to make the Euro-Atlantic community whole and free, such political values risk being undermined because of NATO’s inconsistent policy toward enlargement.

This applies as well to the Western Balkans, where NATO has made little progress. NATO signed an accession protocol with Montenegro in May 2016 despite widespread corruption and weak rule of law.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which in 1999 was offered NATO’s Membership Action Plan, putting the country on track to joining the alliance,

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**NATO has not had a political discussion about the future status of its Eastern neighbors.**

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has had the door to full membership repeatedly closed because of a dispute with Greece over Macedonia's name.<sup>51</sup> There is also deadlock over granting Bosnia and Herzegovina the Membership Action Plan.

These are all highly political issues. They require NATO, as a political organization, to raise and tackle disputes among its members. Having been in limbo for so long due to Greek objections, Macedonia can no longer take its stability for granted. NATO, but also the EU, carries much of the responsibility for this. The Three Wise Men were spot on when they wrote, "Consultation within an alliance means more than exchange of information, though that is necessary. It means more than letting the NATO Council know about national decisions that have already been taken; or trying to enlist support for those decisions. It means the discussion of problems collectively, in the early stages of policy formation, and before national positions become fixed."

## NATO's Role in Asia

A key question for NATO in general and the incoming U.S. administration in particular is whether the United States will encourage the alliance to use its partnership programs to develop some kind of security or political relationship with Southeast Asian countries—as NATO has been doing with Australia and Japan.

In the Asia-Pacific region, NATO currently has few mechanisms for dispute resolution or confidence building. "Setting up NATO-style mechanisms for dialogue in the Far East would appear to be a good option for addressing US security concerns with China," Donnelly wrote. He argued that the alliance's political mechanisms have been undervalued in the past decade, largely due to a preoccupation with the military deployment in Afghanistan, and that these mechanisms "need rediscovering and rejuvenating."<sup>52</sup> Were NATO to develop dialogue mechanisms in East Asia, the alliance would assume a political role while fostering a discussion with the United States about how Washington sees NATO's role in the region.

The United States has already prodded the EU into working more closely with Washington in the region. In 2012, the U.S. State Department, then led by Hillary Clinton, sent a confidential two-page note to the European External Action Service, then headed by Catherine Ashton. In the document, Clinton put forward five priorities for such a dialogue, ranging from shared interests and economic and development coordination to enhanced security engagement. Clinton wrote, "We are witnessing an increasing desire by many in the [Asian] region for outside players to have a larger security and military presence and engagement plan in the region. The United States and the EU can explore elevating their discussions on these issues, with particular regard to expanding cooperation in areas such as maritime, security, anti-piracy efforts, cyber security and counterterrorism."<sup>53</sup> Whether such cooperation would be genuine

and based on a belief in promoting shared values was not clear. Nevertheless, the overture showed that the United States welcomed the support of some Western allies.

The issue of transatlantic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is out there. It will be interesting to see whether the Trump administration will push NATO into expanding its partnership arrangements with other countries in the region.

## Conclusions

The Euro-Atlantic community is going through tremendous social and political changes. U.S. leadership under Obama has fundamentally changed the country's role as the world's policeman. Europe, meanwhile, is divided and weak. Both developments have immense ramifications for the West's ability to project stability, influence, and its values. Squaring these values with interests is a perennial challenge, but it is something that NATO has to grapple with. The challenges facing the alliance have become much more complex and require a plethora of different responses, from the use of diplomacy backed up by hard power to the development of sophisticated ways to counter cyberwarfare and disinformation. That is why the alliance's military role has to be underpinned by a political one.

NATO's European allies need to ask the United States direct political questions about its long-term intentions in Europe; its goals in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighborhoods and the Western Balkans; and what Asia means for NATO. An increased U.S. focus on the Asia-Pacific would have significant implications for the U.S. role in Europe if it meant the United States concluding it was time for Europe to take responsibility for its own security. This possibility should encourage the European members of NATO to begin political discussions about how they should prepare for such a rebalancing. At the same time, the United States needs clarity from its European allies about how they see the future role of the alliance.

That is easier said than done. If these discussions become structured, then NATO ambassadors will have to wait for instructions from their national capitals before they can contribute. If the discussions are informal, maybe there is more scope for open debates. After all, political discussions do not have to lead to decisions. The key is to allow for flexibility while stimulating a new culture in NATO that will encourage national delegations to raise issues even if they are controversial. For far too long, ambassadors have been inhibited about speaking out or beholden to their capitals or, indeed, to the large member states.

Yet big, fundamental questions can no longer be kept on the back burner. The alliance's ability to be resilient determines the West's future as a political, economic, and security power. NATO must get out of its niche and explain the politics of its decisions, the politics that it confronts, and the changing nature of political leadership, which has become prone to short-termism and

subject to the vicissitudes of social media. This means having the confidence to communicate—not to the converted, but to skeptical audiences and opponents—about NATO’s political role and how the transatlantic relationship has kept the West safe and secure since 1949.

The Three Wise Men issued a relevant warning to NATO. The alliance, they wrote, “has faltered at times through the lethargy or complacency of its members; through dissension or division between them; by putting narrow national considerations above the collective interest. It could be destroyed by these forces, if they were allowed to subsist. To combat these tendencies, NATO must be used by its members, far more than it has been used, for sincere and genuine consultation and cooperation on questions of common concern.” Sixty years on, it is time for NATO to heed the report.

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