

NATO at a Critical Crossroads

As NATO prepares for the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the cohesion of the Alliance is put to the test by new threats emanating from Russia, the Middle East, and North Africa. NATO is trying to adapt to the worst security crisis in Europe since 1990, but it is still far from certain that the Alliance will pass the bar. Twenty-eight sovereign states with sometimes divergent interests are preoccupied with short-term interests rather than the strategic vision necessary for effective action.

There is a common understanding that NATO lost its *raison d'être* after the end of the Cold War but, at the same time, there is a widespread misconception about what constitutes the Alliance today and what limitations it must overcome to adapt to new challenges. To understand these limitations, one must briefly delve into 21st century NATO. During the Cold War, the Alliance focused on territorial defence and deterrence of conventional and nuclear aggression. But with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the clearly defined threat of existential proportions disappeared. To adapt to this tectonic shift in the geopolitical environment, NATO underwent a fundamental character evolution. For more than two decades, NATO's central policies have been driven by the absence of state-to-state conflict, the desire to eradicate Cold War divisions and the determination to build good relations with Russia. With no conventional conflict in sight, the Alliance has drifted away from the ability to defend its own territory towards being an organisation able to run crisis-management missions and promote broader security through cooperation with different countries.

Over the years, NATO members have lost the capability and institutional memory necessary to run large-scale, high-intensity warfare. The development of light deployable forces that can be sustained for a long period in multinational environments has become a priority. The new democracies

in Europe were invited to the Alliance but the Article 5 security guarantees were not supported with a command and force structure necessary to secure the defence of these new members. Their potential vulnerability was instead a symbol of trust that was supposed to facilitate cooperation with Russia and turn that relationship into a strategic partnership.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, opened a new chapter in the history of the Alliance. By taking a piece of sovereign territory for itself, Russia dismantled the pan-European architecture of cooperative security. Russia's actions were an open resort to blackmail and coercion in trying to undermine the cohesion of NATO and the EU and weaken the transatlantic link—crucial for the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to Europe. Russia has demonstrated regional military supremacy with its ability to run sudden offensive operations and thwart NATO reinforcements to the Baltic Sea region. The capabilities, patterns of behaviour, and political-military messaging make it clear that Russia perceives the post-Soviet space as its sphere of influence, wants to maintain a buffer zone extending into EU and NATO territory, and attempts to enforce the creation of a new security architecture that would allow it to weigh in on the defence and security choices of sovereign states. Hence, it cannot be excluded that, for Russia, the best way to achieve this would be by undermining the credibility of the Alliance and making it irrelevant as a collective defence organisation; this would represent a significant strategic victory for Russia.

At the same time, instability in the Middle East and North Africa has fuelled a refugee crisis of historical proportions, straining the unity of the EU and NATO members and further enhancing the terrorist threat to the international community. The Russian intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime has added an additional geopolitical dimension to the crisis. An effective strategy for the resolution of the Syrian conflict may require a compromise between the West and Russia, with concessions extending beyond Syria.

To deal with such challenges, NATO needs a strategic vision that translates into political and military credibility of the Article 5 guarantee but at the same time makes the Alliance more relevant for its members that do not feel threatened by Russia. There are a number of areas where NATO will have to overcome the lowest common denominator to deliver tangible results.

First. NATO will need to further strengthen the eastern flank to achieve a level of credible deterrence against Russia on a conventional level. NATO reacted to the crisis in Ukraine with the temporary deployment of troops to the Alliance's border states and during the 2014 Wales summit adopted a Readiness Action Plan that will provide the Allies with a very high readiness brigade of 5,000 troops deployable within days and strengthened follow-on forces of 30,000 deployable within weeks. At the same time, Russia has demonstrated the capability to mobilise about 150,000 troops close to NATO borders within 72 hours. Some experts indicate that this regional superiority may be exploited, not only for intimidation and coercion but also in scenarios that include different sorts of incursions into the Baltic States. Should NATO be unable to claim back lost territory, it would have strategic consequences for the whole Alliance and would compromise it as a pillar of transatlantic security. That is why the Baltic countries and Poland advocate the permanent deployment of NATO troops and equipment on the territory of the border states to strengthen its deterrence and shorten the time to react in a crisis situation. In May 2015, Poland also announced Warsaw's strategic adaptation initiative, a suggestion of further measures for NATO that would facilitate the development of the necessary capabilities and force posture better shaped to respond to a Russian threat.

Second. It is necessary for the Alliance to reassess the credibility of its nuclear deterrence. Russia resorts to open nuclear threats against NATO, and the presence of tactical Iskander missiles in the Baltic Sea region would have serious political and military consequences during a crisis, weakening Western political will to act. Russia's subsequent messaging would make a nuclear threat more viable during the crisis. Faced with the risk of nuclear-level escalation without credible ways to respond, NATO would be forced to acquiesce at the early stages of any confrontation. Yet, to make any changes in nuclear posturing is much more challenging than augmenting conventional deterrence.

Third. NATO must boost its support for the Southern Flank through crisis management capabilities and strengthened partnerships. The refugee crisis and terrorist threat are sharply felt across Europe, even in the far north. But Allies in the south who do not feel directly threatened by Russia prefer NATO to become more effective in dealing not only with distant crises in MENA but also their immediate consequences for internal security. These southern countries are also concerned that investments in the east will

consume limited defence resources and are therefore reluctant to support a strategic adaptation to conventional state-to-state warfare. They also argue that the threat from Russia is exaggerated or temporary and a permanent presence on the eastern flank will only further provoke President Vladimir Putin. Irrespective of their motivation, the fact remains that there is no single, unifying threat perception across the Alliance. To solve this weakness, NATO will have to improve its ability to deal with the most acute threats on the priority lists of different member states. With divergent threat perceptions, it will be crucial to strengthen the Alliance through common interests to make it more responsive to a wide spectrum of challenges.

Fourth. While strengthening its defence capability, NATO must come to consensus on new relations with Russia. It matters whether Russia is treated officially as a partner, a potential threat or an adversary because it will translate into long-term NATO policies. NATO will have to initiate the discussion on the changes in its strategic documents to be able to defend its territory and western values as well. On the other hand, it should be able to support OSCE and EU efforts to rebuild the security order in Europe, with Russia as part of it.

Fifth. With a new strategic reality in which Russia could be a geopolitical challenge, NATO will have to reinvigorate its open-door policy. In the new security context, it is important to remember that further enlargement will complicate the decision-making process and new members may need to be defended. But enlargement is a potent mechanism for strengthening the stability and predictability of states. Additionally, freezing enlargement would only convince Russia that its policy of intimidation is working, which could encourage further aggressive behaviour in the post-Soviet area and beyond, with potentially dramatic long-term consequences for Europe.

Sixth. Last but not least, to deal effectively with a resurgent Russia and the security vacuum in the MENA region, the transatlantic link between Europe and the U.S. must be strengthened. This unifying bond—crucial for the credibility of the Alliance’s defences—was weakened by the growing disparity between U.S. and European defence spending and the massive decrease of the U.S. military presence in Europe. Ideally, European members should increase their defence spending to the mandated minimum of 2% of GDP. Still, this may be unrealistic for some time. It is, however, possible that the European Allies will be ready for more balanced burden-sharing with meaningful support for the worldwide partnerships that form a major pillar of NATO’s global reach.