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The agenda of the NATO summit in Warsaw

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The major concerns at the NATO Summit on 8 and 9 July 2016 will be to prevent a split in the Alliance and to reconcile the interests of the Eastern and the Southern European member states in view of different regional threats. Five issues are likely to dominate the agenda of the summit: the situation in Eastern Europe, the risks emanating from the Middle East, a reform of NATO's partnership policy, the question of enlargement, and the debate about the future nuclear strategy of the Alliance.

NATO presents a mixed picture seven months prior to the July 2016 summit in Warsaw. On the one hand, Russia's neo-imperialist aggression in Eastern Europe has united the Alliance and reactivated its core function as a defence alliance. Its members once again see themselves facing the realities of an "Article 5 world" in which priority is given to Alliance solidarity in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. As a result, the member states agreed to a comprehensive package of measures at the NATO summit in Wales to strengthen their defence capability and have shown commitment to implementing this package – which is not always the case with NATO decisions.

On the other hand, NATO is divided on the issue of where and how it should improve its defence capability: Russia's revisionist course of action in the east and continuing Islamist violence in the south are two very different issues. As a result, there are roughly four different priorities that will be pursued by NATO member states at the Warsaw summit:

- For the Eastern European members, the summit in Warsaw is all about implementing the strengthening of military capabilities, agreed in Wales 2014, in order to improve the deterrence and defence capabilities of NATO vis-à-vis Russia.
- The southern NATO countries want to ensure that the main focus of the Alliance is not entirely on Eastern Europe and demand, for example, that the new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) be suitable for the defence of Southern Europe as well.
- The three large Europeans in NATO – Germany, France and Britain – will attempt to make allowances for both positions in order to reduce tensions between the "south" and the "east".
- With its leading role, the United States is also struggling to maintain a consensus in the Alliance but wants above all Europe as a whole to make a greater military effort towards its own defence.

A transatlantic fault line has also emerged. Complaints by the European NATO states about a lack of American leadership in the Alliance are at present louder than in recent memory and contradict a public belief in Germany for example that, as a result of NSA activities and TTIP worries, Europe is supposedly being domi-

nated by the U.S.. In view of this complex situation, five main issues are likely to influence the agenda in Warsaw.

1. Ukraine, Russia and the role of NATO in Eastern Europe

With the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), agreed in Wales, NATO responded quickly and resolutely to Russia's land grab in Ukraine. Although not all of the 28 NATO governments realised at the same time that Russia's activities were not an isolated action but rather a fundamental violation of the European security order, the dynamic of Wales was maintained. To the surprise of many Allies, Germany of all countries made a special effort to build up new defence capabilities in Eastern Europe. Berlin has also remained true to its principles in the question of economic sanctions for Russia. The Warsaw summit will be all about continuing this adaptation to the new requirements of an Article 5 world. But a number of issues and problems are becoming apparent.

How can NATO, firstly, succeed in closing or at least reducing the capability gaps that were defined in Wales (and in earlier summits)? Closer cooperation as part of the Smart Defence concept or in initiatives such as the Framework Nation Concept (in which NATO countries are grouped around a lead nation for certain military tasks) is helpful but not enough. Russia has shown in so-called snap exercises that it can mobilise and concentrate tens of thousands of soldiers within two to three days. The VJTF with its less than 5,000 men would in an emergency be no match for such forces, especially since its response time is at best five to seven days.

This leads to the second question, namely where the funds for further military investments are to come from. In Wales, the NATO states again pledged – in a very conditional form – that they would in future spend two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence. At present, only five states meet this requirement, six increased their defence expenditures in 2015, and six have continued to make cuts to their defence budget. The complaint is often made that this calculation on the basis of GDP in no way reflects actual contributions to the defence capability of the Alliance. The fact that the defence expenditures of Greece are the second-largest in the Alliance (after the United States) in terms of GDP speaks volumes. In view of its extremely high GDP, Germany is politically unable to adopt a commensurate defence budget – it would be far more than 50 billion euros. Some believe that we should move away from the static two-percent rule and instead view contributions to defence capabilities as a measure of a fair burden sharing. But such qualitative criteria are even more difficult to measure and compare.

Third, NATO will have to agree to a new RAP (RAP 2.0). Russia is well aware of the augmentation measures of NATO and, in addition, knows that it is by far inferior in comparison to Alliance forces which include the tremendous military power of the United States. As a result, Russian military leaders are beginning to “plan around” the RAP by developing concepts to block NATO supply activities in the event of a conflict in parts of Eastern Europe with so-called “area-denial” measures and to use nuclear threats to split the Alliance. Corresponding counter concepts are thus necessary.

Among all the debates about the response to Russian aggression, however, there is also a debate about pseudo problems. To begin with, there will never be complete consensus about an appropriate response to the threat of Russia on account of the different interests in the Alliance, which are influenced by geography and history. Eastern European states will always consider the military strength of NATO to be insufficient, while the member states further to the west and the south are likely to see current measures as sufficient or even too expensive. There is also little to be gained from the discussion of whether the stationing of armed forces in Eastern Europe should be permanent or on a rotation basis (in NATO jargon this is known as “permanent” and “persistent”). As long as NATO is always able to keep a certain number of forces – including American troops and equipment – in Eastern Europe it does not matter whether these forces are rotating or permanently stationed. Another superfluous debate is whether the NATO-Russia Founding Act

should be maintained or terminated. None of the measures NATO has adopted to improve the deterrence and defence capability of the Alliance is contrary to the Founding Act. The act thus does not impair the military strengthening of the Alliance. A formal termination of this document by NATO would only provide Moscow with propaganda and excuses.

2. NATO and the threats from the South

The southern member states – above all Italy and Turkey – fear that the Atlantic alliance is focusing too much on Eastern Europe and underrating the dangers posed by what NATO calls “MENA” (Middle East and Northern Africa). Improvements to deterrence and defence should, they feel, also benefit the “southern flank” of NATO, an argument that is understandable in view of the geographical position of Turkey. However, the southern states in NATO are having difficulty clearly defining their fears and explaining exactly what threats NATO should be addressing and how. Despite all the hype about hybrid warfare, the NATO states in Eastern Europe face a linear threat posed by Russia, which calls for a linear response. A similar narrative for southern Europe is, however, difficult to develop.

The dangers south of the Mediterranean or in the Middle East, such as failing states, extremism and the lack of prospects among ordinary people, are mainly social and economic in nature and can hardly be fought with the instruments of NATO. As understandable as Italy’s concerns were in October 2014 when the Islamist online magazine “Dabiq” published a picture of St. Peter’s Square in Rome with a black flag of the “Islamic State” and called for a storming of this symbol of Christianity, a NATO response is difficult to imagine in this context. On the other hand, the southern member states point out that a deployment of the VJTF is conceivable if, for example, “IS” forces were to attack the Suez Canal and Egyptian troops alone were unable to defend it. How would the defence of Eastern Europe fare if Russia were to choose such a situation as an occasion to attack the Baltic States?

What is also worrying is the fact that the unforeseeable consequences of the refugee crisis are now part of the debates in NATO. For example, southern NATO member states see a lack of solidarity in the behaviour of some Eastern European states regarding the stream of refugees and point out that it is the same Eastern Europeans who call for Alliance solidarity with regard to a Russian threat. Although this debate mixes two separate problems, it might become explosive for the Alliance.

3. The future of NATO partnerships

In the past, NATO has cultivated partnerships with non-NATO states which, as a rule, have been mutually beneficial. These partnerships were generally organised in larger forums: the Partnership for Peace (PfP) for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Mediterranean Dialogue for the Mediterranean region, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) for the Gulf States. For the most part, the partners themselves decided how closely they wanted to cooperate with NATO.

As a result of developments in recent months and years, these forums have largely become dysfunctional. The PfP, of which both Russia and Ukraine are members, has been paralysed by the current conflict. The Mediterranean Dialogue has for years suffered as a result of the conflict between Israel, Egypt and Turkey, while the ICI, which was never particularly active, is at loggerheads over how to deal with “IS”.

Although political reasons prevent any of these forums from dissolving despite their ineffectiveness, a new type of partnership policy is necessary in an Article 5 world. Two new approaches can currently be seen in Alliance debates. Firstly, partnerships are no longer seen as group organisations in which the partners can

choose the extent of their cooperation. Instead, NATO will select states on the basis of its needs and, if they are willing, carry out partnership activities with these states. The aim is to receive support from partners in, for example, crisis management and in return provide training and equipment aid that will help the partner states become more effective. As such, the thinking behind NATO partnerships is very close to that behind the German Enable and Enhance Initiative – although the latter covers more than military support. Possible partners and thus “anchor states” of NATO are Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Secondly, cooperation with these states will no longer take place in the above-mentioned forums but will instead be on an individual basis. In NATO terminology this is known as “28+1” or “28+2”.

4. NATO enlargement

NATO enlargement has been a permanent topic at NATO summits for almost two decades now. Accession candidates such as Georgia, Ukraine, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will again be a subject of disagreement in the coming year. But the realities of the Article 5 world are also bringing major changes to the process of NATO enlargement.

To begin with, Moscow’s revisionist policy in Eastern Europe has meant that the focus of attention has shifted to Sweden and Finland, two countries that in the past considered NATO accession only as a very remote option. This has changed fundamentally. The Warsaw Summit will therefore have to respond to the growing debate on NATO membership in both of these countries, whenever Helsinki and Stockholm express their wish to become members.

It is most likely that Montenegro will be invited to join the Alliance, with preliminary decisions being taken at the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in December 2015. This sends above all a political message, not least to Russia, that NATO is sticking to its “open door policy” and that it refuses to accept a Russian veto against the right of free choice to form alliances. Montenegro’s contribution to NATO may be limited, but that will make it easier to integrate this small country into the Alliance.

The prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine, Georgia and other states in the Western Balkans no longer depends merely on the states themselves, but on a policy dispute going on in the Alliance as a whole. Should NATO enlargement continue to be understood the way the Americans have understood it, namely as a continuous process of transformation of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the sense of a “Europe whole and free”, or should the focus be on improving Alliance efficiency?

The question of which of the two paths is currently more tolerable for Russia is not as important as it would seem. Those, like Germany, who support the second position have previously emphasised that integrating a country such as Ukraine into the Alliance would be extremely difficult given that Ukraine is a state politically fragmented and paralysed by bad governance and corruption. This view also stems from disappointment over other states admitted into NATO (and the EU) that, following their accession, have ignored the promises and commitments they had made. In today’s security environment, in which NATO is again primarily oriented towards national and collective defence, the question is whether the Alliance would even be capable of militarily defending Ukraine, Europe’s second-largest state. It is likely, therefore, that there will be another lengthy pause in the enlargement process following Montenegro’s accession.

5. The future of nuclear deterrence

A particularly delicate question concerns the future role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy. Following the debate over the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, prompted in 2009 by Germany’s then

foreign minister Guido Westerwelle, the Alliance had reached a finely balanced compromise in 2012 with the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), which served to mask the conflicting nuclear interests within NATO. It was based on two principles: Russia is firstly a NATO partner and, secondly, will not direct its sizeable nuclear stockpile in Europe against the Alliance. Neither of these assumptions holds true anymore. Russia has withdrawn once and for all from the partnership and is defining itself as an anti-Western power. Furthermore, the Russian military is using exercises to simulate the use of nuclear weapons against Poland, is threatening to station ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad and is violating NATO airspace with nuclear-capable fighter aircraft.

This does not mean that NATO necessarily has to numerically increase its nuclear potential, or that of the United States. But the Alliance does need to reach a new consensus on its nuclear strategy. This will be difficult since although Eastern European NATO states are currently insisting on a credible form of nuclear deterrence as a means of preventing war, there is a strong anti-nuclear tradition in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.

This is not the only problem. While NATO is able to draw on its Cold War experience of deterring the Soviet Union despite the country's massive build-up of conventional arms, the challenge now lies in deterring Russia, which although conventionally inferior poses an ever-present nuclear threat in the event of a knee-jerk reaction by Moscow. It is generally more difficult to deter a declining power, such as Russia, than an established or rising one. The Warsaw debates will address in particular the question of what function the U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in some European NATO states will have in this constellation. The differing response times will also have to be addressed. Russia may be conventionally inferior on the whole, but within two to three days it could generate considerable force levels by concentrating troops from exercises. NATO's conventional response time within the framework of the VJTF of five to seven days is still a somewhat optimistic estimate. Nuclear-capable NATO fighter jets, which can be fitted with U.S. nuclear bombs, have a response time of about 30 days. This imbalance has led to calls to reduce response times (taking into account the cost factor) and to step up military exercises in the use of nuclear weapons.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the nuclear issue will be addressed at the Warsaw Summit as the U.S. president is taking his leave from NATO. After all, it was Barack Obama who had been awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for his vision of a world without nuclear weapons, which seems unrealistic today.

Conclusion

The 2016 Warsaw Summit can be a success if the various positions within the Alliance can first be harmonised. Whatever the result, this summit will also be described with the usual superlatives like "historical" and "ground-breaking", as such high-level meetings often are. If the Alliance manages to maintain its existing level of cohesion in the face of new threats, Warsaw will be a step further towards NATO's adaptation to the constraints of the Article 5 world – no more and no less.

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This article reflects the personal views of the author.*