

Rediscovering a Strategic Purpose for NATO

By Peter Ricketts

Watford is at first sight an unlikely place for a gathering of world leaders. This nondescript suburb to the north of London found itself briefly in the media spotlight one chilly afternoon in December 2019. Boris Johnson had taken time out from his election campaign just before polling day to host a meeting of NATO leaders. It was intended to be a signal of allied unity in the 70th anniversary year of the 1949 Washington Treaty.

Unity was not, however, the theme uppermost in the minds of the participants as they made their way to a country house hotel for their meeting. Nor was it the focus of the accompanying media throng. The build-up to the Watford meeting had been dominated by a coruscating interview with French President Emmanuel Macron, published in the *Economist* magazine on 7 November 2019. He made the headlines with his phrase that NATO was “brain dead.” But the interview provided a searching analysis of what was wrong with the transatlantic alliance. His point of departure was the shift in American national security priorities towards confrontation with China, and the fact that President Donald Trump was the first occupant of the White House who did not support the idea of European integration. Macron saw that as reinforcing the urgency for Europe to establish what he called “military and technological sovereignty,” a new formulation of the old Gaullist ambition for European strategic autonomy.

The Macron diagnosis of NATO’s plight was that there was no longer any shared strategic objective among its members. He was still furious about a sequence of events which had played out in Western Syria in the previous weeks. President Trump had suddenly withdrawn U.S. forces who were supporting Kurdish militia in the region in their operations against the Islamic State. As soon as the U.S. forces withdrew, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent Turkish forces across the border to attack the very Kurdish units the U.S. had been supporting. Neither country gave any forewarning to NATO allies, even though France was still working with the Kurds and had military personnel in the area—some of whom allegedly came under fire during the Turkish advance. What, asked M. Macron, did this lack of political consultations mean for the credibility of NATO’s Article 5 collective defence guarantee? What if the Syrian regime responded with a military offensive against Turkey—would other allies be willing to go to war in support of Turkey?

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The question was not entirely hypothetical. In February 2020, Syrian forces with Russian support mounted air strikes against the Turkish forces in Syria, killing over 30 Turkish troops. Turkey promptly demanded consultations in NATO under Article 4 of the Treaty. This gives any member state the right to call for consultations whenever they consider that their territorial integrity, political independence, or security is threatened. Ambassadors of NATO countries duly assembled, offered their condolences for the death of Turkish soldiers, condemned the Syrian air strikes and expressed solidarity with Turkey. Appearances were saved, but the bigger question remained—if Syrian forces had crossed into Turkish territory, in retaliation for a Turkish intervention conducted without consultation with NATO allies, how many of those allies would have been willing to commit troops to a war with Syria?

NATO leaders were not about to try to answer that question in Watford. They therefore played safe and decided to set up a “forward-looking reflection process” under the auspices of the Secretary General to make proposals to “further strengthen NATO’s political dimension including consultation.” In March 2020, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the appointment of a 10-person group to take this forward.¹

Redefining NATO’s political role is nothing new. In fact, the very first such exercise—the Three Wise Men’s report of 1956—recommended that the organisation, which had until then been almost entirely military, should develop non-military cooperation and specifically political consultations between members. The Harmel Report of 1967 marked another inflection point, proposing that the Cold War strategy of deterrence should be balanced by more emphasis on *détente*. The questions about NATO’s political role became more insistent after the end of the Cold War. The summit of Allied leaders which I helped to organise in London in June

1990 agreed to extend the hand of friendship to former Warsaw Pact adversaries, and thereby opened the door to NATO enlargement and to the offer of a cooperative relationship with Moscow through the NATO-Russia Council.

NATO adapted fast to the collapse of the Soviet Union and played a vital political role in the stabilisation of Europe. But the organisation’s strategic unity was stretched to the limit by the sequence of expeditionary military operations it led in the two decades after 1990. Twice, the European allies pleaded with President Bill Clinton to commit America’s military and diplomatic muscle to help put an end to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, first in Bosnia and then Kosovo. These were crises of far more direct national security interest to Europeans than to the U.S. Twice, Clinton agreed to a major U.S. contribution to NATO airstrikes and then peacekeeping missions. After 9/11, the Europeans and Canadians returned the favor, invoking Article 5 of the treaty for the first and only time in solidarity with their U.S. ally. They then followed the American lead in contributing to the NATO-led Afghanistan operation. Many struggled to explain to public opinion what their forces were doing there and why—as German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer put it—their security started at the Hindu Kush. But it was the 2003 Iraq war that broke allied solidarity. Although the damage was patched up and NATO opened an officer training academy in Baghdad in 2004, the Iraq effect turned western opinion against using ground forces to try to solve other countries’ problems. The NATO-led Libya air campaign was the curtain-call for an interventionist NATO mission in the wider world. The secondary role which President Barack Obama ordered U.S. forces to play in Libya was a vivid reminder that European security was already moving down the list of U.S. national security priorities.

That was inevitable as the American focus shifted to the Indo-Pacific region and to competition



When the rebellion against Muammar Qaddafi broke out in Lybia in March 2011, NATO launched an air campaign in support of the rebels, but avoided committing boots on the ground. (By Bernd Brincken - Own work, 19 April 2011)

with China. The then-U.S. Defence Secretary, Jim Mattis, was doing no more than confirming an established fact when he announced in presenting the U.S. National Defence Strategy in January 2018 that “great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”² It was a statement heavy with implications for America’s NATO allies. The world in which the U.S. regarded Europe and its neighbourhood as the fulcrum of global stability was over. That was the beginning of a real divergence in strategic priorities among NATO member states. The Europeans themselves were deeply divided among themselves. For countries on NATO’s Northern and Eastern flanks, the overriding national security threat was from Russia. For those looking south across the Mediterranean, migration pressures were the highest priority. For Turkey, it was the instability in Syria and the threat

from what they saw as Kurdish terrorism. For France, it was that Europe risked losing its sovereignty in a world of great power competition.

To complete that list, what is Britain’s strategic priority? That is harder to answer. It has been impossible to discern any clear direction in British foreign policy since the 2016 referendum vote pitchforked the country into four years of bitter and divisive argument about how to tear itself away from its 45-year membership of the European Union. The two pillars of its post-war national strategy—to be both a central player in Europe and the closest partner of the United States—are now both in need of a fundamental reappraisal. So far, the only answer successive British governments have produced is the empty slogan “Global Britain.” Now, an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy has been launched,³ but, like so much

other government business, it has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the Review does appear, one of its conclusions should be that NATO has become more important to Britain as the main forum for political and security dialogue with its closest partners, and that Britain therefore has a strong national interest in taking a leading role in rebuilding the mutual confidence which is the bedrock of the alliance. That can only be achieved if the Europeans, Canadians, and the U.S. administration are all willing to take the necessary steps.

On the European side, two would make a real difference. First, taking on a greater share of the defence burden is a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for re-vitalising NATO. U.S. Presidents since Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s have been calling for this. The Europeans (and Canadians) were far quicker than the U.S. to take the peace dividend in the years after 1989—while expecting the U.S. protective umbrella to remain in place. By 2018, U.S. defence spending amounted to 71 percent of NATO's combined defence expenditure while U.S. GDP was only 51 percent of the total of NATO countries. The goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence was first set at the NATO Summit in 2006. But it was only in 2014 that there was any noticeable increase in overall defence spending by non-U.S. NATO members, and this was largely in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that year. The NATO Secretary General confirmed in late 2019 that over the previous five years member states had spent an extra \$130 billion, with nine meeting the 2 percent target, up from five the previous year. Even Germany committed to increasing its defence spending from 1.2 percent to 1.5 percent by 2025 and increasing the size of the Bundeswehr from 176,000 to over 200,000.

The combination of a more threatening international climate, and the sharply-increased pressure from President Donald Trump from

2017—including the suggestion that he would only come to the defence of countries that were meeting the goal of spending 2 percent—was working before the pandemic pitched the world into a deep recession. The impact that this will have on the budget decisions of NATO member states remains unclear as I write. It must now be less likely that there will be further major increases for defence in the foreseeable future. But the threats from adversarial states have not diminished because of the human health crisis. Countries like Britain, which are committed to continuing to meet the 2 percent target, have a responsibility to press those which are not to sustain their announced increases in spending. And there is much that European allies can do to make their defence procurement more efficient and better targeted on filling gaps in capability.

That leads to the second step the European NATO members must take; to ensure that the concept of European strategic autonomy develops in a way that is compatible with NATO. It has always been an ambiguous, not to say slippery, term; autonomy from what precisely and for what purpose? My participation in the European debates on this issue since the 1989 Saint Malo agreement between Britain and France on European defence,⁴ has shown me that different European countries give different answers to these questions. French governments have always operated on the assumption that one day Europe will have to take on responsibility for its own defence, and that the EU should be preparing actively for that by reducing dependence on the U.S. and by developing the capacity to undertake military action—up to major combat operations—alone. Germany has until recently had a more Atlanticist reading of autonomy, interpreting it as intended to strengthen the European role within NATO. It is true that German thinking on defence has moved since 2017 in a more European direction as a result of the estrangement between Washington and Berlin. But in my assessment the current German Government still

sees autonomy more in terms of efficient European defence industries than military separation from the U.S. The British approach has always been even further towards the pro-NATO end of the spectrum, sceptical that the EU is institutionally suited to taking on a real defence role, and in favor of European countries improving their military capability mainly as a contribution to NATO.

The combination of President Trump's open doubting of the value of NATO at the start of his term and Britain's departure from the EU has given President Macron the opportunity to push harder for the French interpretation of European strategic autonomy. But he has only found limited support from among EU member states, especially when French reasoning is pushed to the extreme of suggesting a European Army. The closer that countries are to Russia, the more they are conscious that the EU will not be in any state for many years to provide a credible deterrent. British defence academics Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar concluded in a 2019 study;

Even a cursory examination of European military forces reveals how completely dependent they would be on the United States in the event of any significant continental conflict—to provide some initial mass and then reinforcement, for transport, engineering, air cover, tactical command and control, intelligence—to name only the most obvious deficiencies. Nothing the European powers are pledged to improve over the next 10 years, either through NATO or rejuvenated EU defence initiatives, will create the step change necessary to alter this simple fact.... They could not defend themselves alone in a war for their own territories or for survival.⁵

It would bring greater honesty and clarity to the debate about NATO's future role if the EU accepted that the goal of strategic autonomy was not

a preparation for dispensing with the U.S. as an ally. The careful balance struck in the UK-French Saint Malo agreement remains the best way of reconciling the various approaches in Europe. This document made clear that strengthening European military capabilities both contributed to "the vitality of a modernised Atlantic Alliance" and gave the EU its own option to deploy military forces where "the alliance as a whole was not engaged." EU members accepted in practice that their fledgling military capacity would be used at the lower end of the military spectrum, for example on missions like peacekeeping, training, and disaster relief. That position remains the center of gravity in the European debate. The French are outliers in maintaining their ambition of complete autonomy from the United States at some point. But the very fact of talking, as President Macron sometimes does, of a European Army may encourage some in Washington to conclude that they no longer need to invest in European security through NATO, even though the European countries are patently unprepared to counter-balance the threat from Russia alone.

In short, a NATO in which European member states and Canada bore more of the financial burden and contributed more of the military capability would be a more durable NATO, but only if the latent ambiguity in the concept of strategic autonomy can be clarified in a NATO-friendly direction.

There is work to do as well in the United States to restore confidence in the fundamental NATO bargain. A community of democracies built on a political commitment to mutual military support depends crucially on trust. That trust has been undermined by the doubts expressed by the Head of State of NATO's largest member about the value of the organisation and whether the U.S. would come to the aid of a NATO member who was not meeting the 2 percent target. The evidence that the Europeans are now taking their defence more seriously and spending more on it creates the



Despite the restrictions in place due to COVID-19, the U.S. Air Force 31st Fighter Wing remains lethal and combat ready, prepared to deter or defeat any adversary who threatens U.S. or NATO interests. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman Thomas S. Keisler IV)

opportunity for U.S. administrations present and future to reaffirm their confidence in the value of the transatlantic alliance. They are on solid ground in doing so since NATO is better prepared militarily for its core task of territorial defence than at any time since the Cold War. The United States, Britain, and other NATO members have deployed combat-ready forces to Poland and the Baltic States. The Pentagon has spent \$2.2bn on pre-positioning warfighting equipment in Europe. Readiness has been improved. NATO has stepped up work against threats in space and cyber space. Congressional support for NATO remains strong, as evidenced by the large delegations from both Houses who decamp every year for the Munich Security Forum, the high point of the Alliance's annual round of ruminations. And American public opinion has consistently been

favorable to NATO judging from the annual survey from the Pew Research Center, even though the level of support dropped from a high of 64 percent who viewed NATO positively in 2018 to 52 percent in 2019, perhaps reflecting the tone of Presidential comments in the early part of the Administration.

The steps set out above would all help improve the climate of transatlantic relations in which the Reflection Group will be working. But the only way to restore a sense of shared strategic purpose to NATO is to re-establish honest political consultations among the allies on the issues of greatest security concern to them. It was the lack of such open consultations over the intentions of the United States and Turkey in Syria which soured the build-up to the Watford gathering, as we have seen. Given that the epicenter of global security is shifting

to Asia, and that the problems of the post-pandemic world will go far beyond the transatlantic area, it is time to broaden the scope of political consultations in NATO. Asian security issues should figure more prominently. Many European countries may not have much to offer on this issue in substance, but all would be affected by a worsening security situation in the region. All have an interest in showing that the transatlantic alliance remains relevant to core American security interests. America's allies in Asia should be invited regularly to the NATO table to take part. Australian and New Zealand forces fought bravely as part of the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan. Japan provided logistic support. All are comfortable at working as NATO partners and would enrich the dialogue on the security challenge from China. South Korea is on the front line of the most dangerous regional flashpoint and would be a natural partner as well.

Reinforced NATO consultations on these lines would also provide an excellent forum for the democracies to coordinate their approach to strategic technologies of the future. The rows over Huawei's access to the British and other 5G telecoms markets showed how dependent the West has become on China for design and manufacturing in some critical areas. Western countries need to think and plan together if they are to safeguard sovereign capabilities in key technologies of the future such as telecoms and artificial intelligence, and the advanced manufacturing processes associated with them.

The Reflection Group will now also have to consider what the pandemic means for the future of international cooperation and for NATO's political role. They might begin by recalling that NATO was never just an alliance against the Soviet Union. From the outset, it was a partnership to uphold the wider values of its member states. That is explicit in the Treaty, although these provisions are now largely forgotten. The Preamble to the Treaty makes the ringing declaration that the member states,

... are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.

Article 2 takes NATO way beyond the parameters of a military alliance:

The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.

This wider role was a vital part of NATO's purpose in the mind of the founding fathers. One of the principal negotiators of the Washington Treaty, Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, commented in a radio address shortly after signing the document that it was,

An endeavour to express on paper the underlying determination to preserve our way of life—freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the rights and liberty of the individual.⁶

Part of the answer to finding a new political role for NATO in the post-pandemic world is to get back to this original sense that it is a community of democracies, not just a military alliance. The references in the Treaty to well-being, stability, and economic cooperation give plenty of scope for NATO to turn its vast experience in logistics, planning, and command and control to the new imperative of much greater resilience against disruptive threats of all kinds. The organisation

is already active in helping its member states to prevent a catastrophic cyber-attack and to deal with the consequences if one occurs. Its main contribution to resilience more generally is the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). This little-known NATO body acts as a clearing-house for matching requests for assistance in emergencies with offers of support. In the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis it organised several deliveries of equipment and supplies mainly to smaller allies and NATO partner countries. But its activities were invisible to the wider public. NATO could step up significantly its support for resilience in member states and partner countries against future disruptive events using its extensive military planning and command and control assets. That is a distinctive contribution it can make to wider international efforts to improve foresight and preparedness. It would enable NATO to take a more prominent role in future civil emergencies.

As well as being of material benefit to future work on resilience, building up NATO's contribution to human security in this way would have a positive impact on how the organisation is perceived by public opinion. The generation under the age of 40 in most Allied countries would have struggled even before the pandemic to say what NATO was for. They would not have seen any evidence since then that NATO was relevant in the greatest human health crisis in the world for a century. Nor does it have any obvious relevance to the other overriding priority for this generation—the climate emergency. If NATO is to survive, it must both find a new sense of shared purpose among member states and articulate that in a way that resonates with the generation for whom the Cold War is ancient history. It needs to get much better at communicating to public and parliamentary opinion in all member states the practical contribution a reformed NATO can make to their security and well-being. Many of the high-readiness capabilities needed to deter would-be

state adversaries are also a precious resource for governments in dealing with disruptive shocks of all kinds. That is the kind of adaptability NATO has shown over the decades. It would be consistent with the wider values set out in the overlooked parts of the Washington Treaty.

The most insidious threat to the future of NATO is not the divergence of strategic priorities between member states. Provided all subscribe to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law, there will be much more that unites them than divides them. It is when allied governments start to move away from these fundamental freedoms that the real problems arise. Turkey is the only member of NATO to be ranked by Freedom House in their latest “Freedom in the World” survey as “not free,” reflecting the suppression of political rights and civil liberties by President Erdoğan.⁷ Hungary is graded only “partly free”—and that was before Prime Minister Victor Orban used the current crisis to give himself powers to rule by decree for an indefinite period. If these trends continue, NATO will face intensely difficult choices. There is no provision in the Washington Treaty for a member state to be expelled. Any such proposal would provoke a grave crisis. But the elastic of tolerance for authoritarian policies cannot be stretched indefinitely in a democratic alliance.

That is a problem well beyond the remit of the Reflection Group. It is also not a static one. Opposition parties in Turkey have already made gains against President Erdogan's AKP party in local elections. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may also strengthen the attractions of alliance relationships. The first reactions to the pandemic in most countries have inevitably been to accentuate national self-reliance. But rebuilding prosperity and security will demand competence from governments and greater cooperation and solidarity among nations. NATO was conceived in the aftermath of the last global cataclysm. The mutual

support it can offer its members will be just as relevant to the process of reconstruction that lies ahead. That is a message that those member states who are currently moving away from the organization's core values would do well to ponder. **PRISM**

Endnotes

¹NATO, "Secretary General appoints group as part of NATO reflection process", NATO press release, March 31, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174756.htm.

²Reuters, "U.S. military puts 'great power competition' at heart of strategy: Mattis", January 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-china-russia/u-s-military-puts-great-power-competition-at-heart-of-strategy-mattis-idUSKBN1F81TR>.

³United Kingdom, Prime Minister's Office, "PM outlines new review to define Britain's place in the world", press release, February 26, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-outlines-new-review-to-define-britains-place-in-the-world>.

⁴For an analysis of the St Malo agreement and its aftermath, see *The EU and Defence: The Legacy of St Malo* Peter Ricketts RUSI Journal Vol 162, No 3 June/July 2017.

⁵Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar, *Tipping Point: Britain, Brexit and Security*, (London: I.B. Tauris, November 28, 2019), P.205.

⁶As quoted in *The life and times of Ernest Bevin; (Vol. 3), Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 1945-1951*, Alan Bullock 1983, Vol. 3 p. 671.

⁷See *Freedom in the World 2020* at <https://freedom-house.org/report/freedom-world>.