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# NATO: Warsaw and Beyond

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### Introduction

On 9–10 June 2016, the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House hosted a roundtable entitled 'Towards Warsaw and Beyond: Reviewing NATO's Strategic Posture and Capabilities' as part of its project on 'Bridging the Gap: Reviewing NATO's Strategic Posture and Capabilities'. Building on workshops held over the previous six months, the US and the Americas Programme, jointly with the Polish Institute for International Affairs (PISM) and the Center for War Studies (CWS) at the University of Southern Denmark convened this expert roundtable to provide insight and analysis of the most pressing challenges faced by NATO as it geared up for its summit in Warsaw in July and to look beyond it. Given resurgent geopolitical concerns, new and evolving challenges and long-standing structural issues, the summit was an important opportunity to review the alliance's progress since the previous one held in Wales in 2014 and to define a path forward.

NATO is now much larger than when it was originally founded; its membership having grown from 12 to 28, and it now has numerous external partners, such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. Having more than doubled in size, it is now more difficult for NATO to reach a political consensus as member states prioritize different challenges and objectives, influenced by their exposure to any given threat.

Furthermore, political challenges within member states could undermine the cohesion and effectiveness of the alliance. For example, some roundtable participants claimed that the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, which took place shortly after the workshop, could be considered an example of a core member state shifting its focus internally and moving away from the alliance. The result of the referendum was expected to feature in the summit discussions, along with what could be its second- and third-order effects, such as the potential to trigger a second Scottish independence referendum. That could, according to participants, have profound implications for the stability of the alliance.<sup>1</sup>

This case highlights a potential future problem for NATO. Even if it is able to adapt to external developments in the international order, any continued growth in nationalist and isolationist tendencies in its member states is likely to mean challenges from within that could undermine its legitimacy. Donald Trump's comments throughout the US presidential election campaign questioning the necessity of NATO should be seen in that light.

### Approaching the summit

As at the Wales Summit in 2014, the alliance's approach towards Russia was inevitably going to be a central theme of the Warsaw Summit. The question of whether NATO has sufficient capabilities to deter Russia and whether it should be concentrating its efforts on building up its presence on its eastern flank was high on the agenda of the roundtable, just as it was at the summit.<sup>2</sup> Whether the current structure of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) with additional forces on standby was sufficient, or whether more was needed was a recurring theme in the discussion – as was the question of whether any posture agreed in Warsaw would be sustainable over the long term.

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<sup>1</sup> There were few official statements during the summit on the British decision. However the United Kingdom's foreign secretary, Philip Hammond, reportedly remarked that the potential consequences had dominated informal conversations. See Taylor P, and Emmott, R. (2016), 'Brexit Anxiety Eats into NATO Summit', Reuters, 9 July 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-nato-idUKKCN0ZPoCA> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

<sup>2</sup> It was argued that President Vladimir Putin believes that the EU poses a bigger threat to Russia than does NATO due to the perceived desirability of EU membership for countries in the region and to the fact that EU accession or association requirements require states to undertake market and political reforms that push them toward the West and away from Russia.

In addition, participants in the roundtable commented that a defined strategy (as opposed to the current shared approach) on how to approach Russia is required. NATO must decide collectively whether it views Russia as a strategic threat or a peer competitor, while member states need to recognize that the Russian challenge will not diminish in the near term.

Associated with this, NATO must finally decide upon its position on the question of membership for Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>3</sup> The alliance can reinforce its partnership agreements with these states (and others), but that is not a strategy that can be extended indefinitely.

The other central topic was terrorism, particularly in light of recent attacks in Europe. The Warsaw Summit was an opportunity for NATO to define what counter-terrorism means today, and to determine its role in such efforts and the measures it can take in countering non-state actors such as ISIS. Participants disagreed on whether the alliance's role should be to deter non-state actors and indicated conceptual and practical problems with deterring such entities. But they agreed that, at a minimum, NATO could contribute to counter-terrorism through better crisis management. In conjunction with this, NATO needs to consider what its strategy will be with regard to stabilizing the Middle East.

All these external challenges will need to be tackled in the context of continuing internal challenges, including diminishing capabilities, lower defence spending and changing interests among member states. The unity and cohesion of the alliance is under threat from internal disputes regarding burden-sharing as well as divergent defence spending levels.

If recent trends suggesting diminishing interest from the United States in engagement in Europe persist, European states will need to make significant investments in their military capabilities and capacity. If the United States continues to focus on Asia while asking Europe to take on a greater burden of leadership in the international arena, then there are likely to be instances in which it will be reluctant or even unwilling to support European-led military operations with its troops. The United States will continue to expect Europe to do more to secure its borders and its neighbouring regions. This occurs in a context in which most members do not adhere to the NATO target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence.

Differing priorities and threat perceptions also hamper NATO's effectiveness, an issue not only for the Warsaw Summit but for years to come. Members on the eastern flank of the alliance unsurprisingly prioritize threats emanating from Russia, a concern that is echoed by the United States. Meanwhile, the continued flows of migrants and refugees from Syria and North Africa draw the attention of members on NATO's southern flank. This has the potential to divide NATO; for example, over large refugee and migrant flows and the extent to which a military alliance should focus on it (though this particular issue is also made more complex by Russia's support of the Assad regime in Syria, which somewhat merges the threat perceptions from NATO members on both flanks).

For political and prestige reasons, as well as practical ones, Poland hoped that the Warsaw Summit would produce a landmark decision reflecting NATO's adaptation to the new threat environment following Russia's invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> This underlined a growing fault line within NATO as

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<sup>3</sup> In Warsaw, NATO reaffirmed its partnership with Ukraine, committing to providing strategic advice and practical support, while aspiring to the full implementation of the Minsk Agreement to settle the ongoing conflict in the east of the country. The alliance also recognized the continuing progress of Georgia in preparing for eventual membership, as set out at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, while acknowledging that forthcoming elections will be a key step towards consolidating democratic institutions. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2016), 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué', 9 July 2016, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm) (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Arguably, no landmark decision in the sense mooted during our roundtable was made during the Warsaw Summit. Instead, most of the decisions made were a continuation of ongoing processes, such as reaffirmations of

the difference in capabilities and needs among allies emerges. For some members that are physically closer to external threats, such as Poland and Turkey, NATO serves as the main line of defence. For others, such as the United Kingdom or the United States, for whom security threats are less geographically proximate, NATO is one of many options that can be utilized. The risk in this relates to the growing divide between those states that will invest heavily in NATO and those that will not. At the same time, NATO's decision-making structure creates path dependence, which pushes it towards taking politically expedient positions.

The roundtable participants concluded that the starting point to tackling these challenges was improving shared capabilities and interoperability among member states. Allies need to be ready to assist each other with their capabilities against new and evolving threats, such as in the case of cyber-based attacks (where, so far, they remain secretive about their capabilities for fear of undermining them). At the same time, due to the nature of threats from non-state actors potentially originating from anywhere, allies need to share intelligence and expertise more effectively within NATO. Closer cooperation with partners, including the EU, is also necessary.

### NATO's ability to deter

NATO's ability to deter is as important, if not more important, than its ability to defend. While these two objectives clearly interact, NATO's posture is more about 'deterrence by punishment' than by 'denial'.<sup>5</sup> In addition to building this capacity, building and maintaining resolve among member states is also vital.

Traditionally, NATO has focused on deterring states, and while theoretically it is difficult to determine whether it has completely fulfilled its mandate as a defensive alliance, the absence of an attack on its members could be viewed as a sign of its success. One recent example of Russia being influenced by NATO's deterrent posture: when it limited its reaction after Turkey downed a Russian jet in November 2015.

A key question for the roundtable participants was whether NATO is capable of deterring non-state actors, whether it has the tools to do so, and whether this should even be a standard by which its success is measured. The major terrorist attacks in the United States (2001), France (2015–16) and Belgium (2016), along with growing threats in cyberspace, suggest that NATO has not successfully deterred non-state threats, or at least that its deterrence capabilities outside the conventional sphere are limited. If its members continue to face new challenges from non-state actors, such as ISIS, NATO will be compelled to respond. Its challenge in deterring them stems from its imperfect understanding of their motives. Furthermore, NATO cannot use force against non-combatants or civil infrastructure, which limits its ability to deter by threat of punishment groups that are embedded among civilian populations.

Deterrence depends in large part on capabilities. While the VJTF as a 'spearhead force' is important for this (not least as an indicator of political will to act) the ability to follow up on its use is also vital. Currently, despite the creation of a rapid reinforcement capability, it is not clear whether NATO has the ability to follow up on a significant scale. Talk of an enhanced forward presence in member states on the eastern flank of the alliance is also an indicator that the VJTF is not sufficient.

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commitments to the security of the eastern flank and striving towards greater cooperation with the EU and other partners.

<sup>5</sup> Deterrence by punishment refers to the idea that hostile actors can be deterred by their certainty that they will face negative ramifications for taking an action. Deterrence by denial refers to steps which make it impossible for hostile actors to take that action in the first place.

At the same time, deterrence is not just about military assets, but also about the ability to put pressure on an adversary economically and through other instruments. For this reason NATO needs to continue to work closely with partners outside the defence realm.

Deterrence is the cumulative effect of many actions. It can be achieved through capacity-building efforts such as war games and joint training. Better strategic communication and interoperability can further strengthen NATO's ability to deter. So too would be a redoubling of efforts to develop a stronger relationship between NATO's land, sea, air and cyber forces.

One significant challenge to NATO's ability to deter state and non-state actors is its inability to pursue a limited-war option. The unwillingness of member states to engage in full-scale conflict and the restrictions on actions NATO can take against non-state actors without engaging in traditional warfare make building the political will to take action hard, and thus diminish the likelihood that it will act against an adversary. On the other hand, limited war is not an area in which NATO has competitive advantage, so there are good arguments for avoiding this option.

### NATO's ability to adapt

Several roundtable participants claimed that NATO's greatest strength is that, since its inception, it has constantly evolved and developed new strategies and techniques to meet changing contexts. However, the extent to which NATO can adapt is determined by its members.

NATO's ability to adapt is in large part determined by the two-year summit cycle, which allows for the review of progress and the setting of the agenda for the following two years. The only other instance in which a large-scale transformation would take place within the alliance is after a major crisis that directly threatens members, such as the 9/11 attacks, which (re-)established global terrorism as a direct threat to the domestic security of member states and led to an internal reorganization of the alliance. As some participants suggested, genuine NATO adaptation, which involves a deep reshuffle of its strategy, overall force posture and structures, has turned out to be possible only when a 'security paradigm shift' occurs. Such a shift should be understood as a qualitative and quantitative change in the overall security environment, followed by a change in how threats are perceived and responded to.

This difficulty with adaptation is largely due to the size and complexity of the alliance and the importance that its members place on consensus. It was suggested that the sources of adaptation and innovation within NATO need to be institutionalized rather than remain dependent on the input from member states. NATO needs to be able to be 'adaptable by design' – and its process of adaptation must be continuous rather than taking place in stages and prompted by external events.

Participants said that NATO is only slowly adapting to the changing security paradigm. The changing environment will, in time, lead to political adaptation, which will ultimately usher in military and institutional adaptation. This occurred after the end of the Bosnian conflict in 1995 and the terrorist attack of 9/11. It is not clear, however, whether Russia's aggressiveness since its invasion of Crimea represents a changing paradigm and thus is sufficient to result in real adaptation.

### NATO's (new) capabilities

NATO's capabilities are derived from its member states and an array of capabilities is required in order for the alliance to be credible and able to deliver effectively on its commitments to its members.

Following the Wales Summit in 2014, NATO created the VJTF in order to establish an enhanced joint readiness force in response to developing crises on its borders with the potential to threaten the security of its members. While this has been hailed as a positive development for strengthening security, member states need to further develop the necessary infrastructure to complement the speed of the VJTF, such as for its rapid transportation as well as for follow-on forces. NATO may also want to further strengthen, and move beyond, the VJTF by applying the lessons learned from its creation to a larger force.

NATO continues to operate on the traditional procurement paradigm of convincing allies to purchase military systems. While this remains relevant, it is increasingly important to pay attention to other considerations such as personnel numbers, an issue that may be more pressing than that of hardware as some member states' militaries continue to shrink.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the new security landscape incorporates different types of threats that hardware capabilities alone are unable to combat. Therefore, efforts need to be made to further develop and establish agile forward-operating forces that are capable of handling concurrent contemporary problems.

Participants argued that there needed to be a reassessment of the pool of forces across NATO and a refocusing on interoperability in order to prevent duplication of effort. However, the alliance may find it hard to achieve this goal as global economic instability has contributed to the reluctance, or inability, of its members to commit funding to sustain it. NATO will likely continue to draw on support from its partners where it is possible to do so and learn from their experiences, which it can do at little or no cost.

Working with partners also allows NATO to integrate other instruments into a more comprehensive response to threats. Political, economic, diplomatic and military capabilities are more effective when working together.

NATO's agility, and the way in which it is able to draw on internal and external resources from allies and partners, while legitimating itself as a multinational defence organization, remains the crux of the alliance's value.

### Where can NATO spend better?

In times of economic uncertainty, NATO stands to benefit from pooling and sharing<sup>7</sup> of resources as a way to deal with future funding limitations, which would allow it to spend more effectively. This stands to work most effectively when a member state no longer has the desire to fund broad capabilities for itself and would instead be willing to specialize within a particular field. Under these circumstances, it might be more effective to evaluate states on whether they are among the leading funders of a specific capability. This would ultimately ensure that the alliance has specialized capacity across the full spectrum of what may be required to face traditional and evolving threats. It should be noted, however, that while pooling and sharing is important, it is vital that a critical mass of capable forces is maintained in each member state. With cuts in force numbers across many of them, this is becoming increasingly in question.

At the same time, NATO needs to maintain the requirement to meet the two per cent of GDP expenditure target, which has been a challenge in the post-Cold War era when domestic challenges appear to

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<sup>6</sup> Perlo-Freeman, S., Felurant, A., Wezeman, P. and Wezeman, S. (2016), *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2015*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2016, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1604.pdf> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Pooling and sharing refers to the practice of creating central capabilities for specific capabilities (such as air refuelling tankers or airborne radar planes), which would be uneconomical for individual member states to acquire on their own. Those assets can be shared to member states on an as-needed basis.

predominate. Understandably, it is easier to motivate a state to spend more on defence when there is a pressing security issue, such as an imminent threat, but even then it is a difficult task to achieve.

Public opinion continues to play a major role in convincing states to spend more on defence. NATO should seek to re-establish its public presence in member states and remind publics of its mission and worth. Likewise member states can be encouraged to spend more on defence by making information on hostile actions they face publicly available, which would also motivate overall support for the organization.

In the same vein, NATO might want to consider involving finance ministers in its discussions. They would be able to provide a realistic case for what is attainable while potentially bringing new information and a fresh viewpoint. Even if they argue for less funding, this too would put pressure on defence ministers to pool and share more.

Several participants raised concerns over a perceived growing intellectual deficit within NATO, suggesting that a number of NATO experts still operate within the Cold-War mind-set. In addition to ensuring a critical mass of forces exists, any additional funding NATO should include investing in more analysts and academics in the defence space as a relatively low-cost option compared to other activities. This has the potential to bring significant benefits and provide long lasting impact towards modernising the strategic thinking of the alliance.

### How important are the public and partners?

Most participants said that there was generally a positive view among the informed public regarding NATO, but that the broader public was typically not interested in the specific details and different components of the alliance, and that NATO was not often at the front of their mind when thinking about security. To build legitimacy and greater public buy-in for its strategies, NATO needs to reach a larger proportion of the population within its member states and explain its significance in the post-Cold War era. To reach young people in particular, NATO and member-state governments should harness newer channels such as social media.

Governments need to play a larger role in informing their respective publics of the importance of NATO's mission and the defensive capabilities that it offers. This will require strong political leadership, given the challenge of explaining the somewhat intangible benefits of NATO in times of relative peace, while the need to focus on domestic goals is more obvious. To this end, governments need to make efforts in explaining to their publics what NATO actually does and how it impacts them specifically. NATO needs to be distilled into a narrative, for example one that would stress its ability to act as an 'insurance policy'.

Engaging a broader audience will require more transparency and trusted policy-makers as well as independent opinion leaders. This should encourage NATO to work more closely with governments and governments to form closer relationships with think-tanks and academic institutions. While NATO is an effective interlocutor for national elites, states have more legitimacy when it comes to engaging their publics. Governments should draw on polls when crafting policy in order to ensure NATO is responsive to public opinion.

NATO's legitimacy among some publics has been undermined by a hostile propaganda campaign emanating from Russia. Roundtable participants argued that NATO needs to be more proactive in its public engagement and less reactive. It could strengthen its legitimacy and secure public support by

increasing its efforts to debunk Russian propaganda, which fosters doubt about the alliance's purpose and encourages distrust of the alliance.

Corporate actors, particularly those active in cyber space, also have a role to play in working with NATO. However, the challenge for NATO here is often to work with business while being sensitive to a delicate balance between the benefits of better collaboration and the reputational risks (to both sides) of being too tightly linked. Also adding complexity is the fact that while the issues are often national, the businesses are often multinational.

### Post-Warsaw and beyond

Participants in the roundtable identified several topics likely to arise between the Warsaw Summit and the next summit, to be held in Brussels in 2017, while pointing out that NATO will need to enforce the commitments made in Warsaw in order to ensure its continued legitimacy.

In the coming years, NATO faces several challenges that it will need to address. First it needs to implement the deliverables agreed on at the Wales and Warsaw summits. This means, among other things, building up an enhanced forward presence in Poland and the three Baltic states and responding to the Russian challenge and unrest in the Middle East. In order to be more effective it needs to continue building its relationships with partners, including in particular the EU. And, given the changes since its creation, it will need to revisit the Strategic Concept and, perhaps, the NATO Command Structure.

NATO will need to establish a consensus regarding how it will respond to not only strong states, but also weak and failed states, as well as non-state actors on its periphery. Several threats that have emerged in the post-Cold War era are from weak and failed states, and the alliance needs to come to an agreement about how it should address these.

Efforts dedicated at improving engagement with Russia should be encouraged, at least in specific areas. Participants said that NATO should continue to pursue a twin-track approach of defence and dialogue, as meaningful dialogue with Russia is a low-cost way of managing risk. This could evolve into building greater transparency with Russia, but this can only be achieved if Russia reciprocates and mutual trust exists.

The alliance should work on developing a full-fledged cyber defence strategy. This requires creating a cyber operational domain that will help officials define the terms of a conflict that takes place partly or wholly online. Cyber capabilities will most likely remain within states, but NATO should have a readily available platform for cyber responses if necessary and should strive towards a unified policy.

If populist and isolationist movements continue to grow in Europe and the United States, in its public engagement NATO should emphasize the positive aspects of globalization and alleviate fears from outside the alliance. The rise of populist parties and candidates will most likely not lead to NATO being discarded, but it may, if mismanaged, lead to the sidelining or diminishment of the alliance. NATO needs to develop a resource-efficient strategy that is able to function during peacetime, while making it clear to adversaries that it remains a formidable competitor. But it also needs to broaden its appeal from elites to a wider base of public support.