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Before the Brussels Summit: How is the NATO Alliance Doing, Really?

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The revived Russian threat brings NATO back to its roots at this year's summit in Brussels, which might be the most important in the Alliance's recent history.

On 16 March 2018, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) hosted a private, off the record seminar held under non-attribution rules for the Security and Defence in Northern Europe (SNE) project. Participants included senior NATO officials, serving and former senior military officers, and participants from the SNE partner organisations in the US, Norway, Germany and the UK. This article is the result of the various discussions held during that event.

Introduction and Background

To many, NATO has been conditioned by behaviours and activity over the past 30 years. In a post-Cold War environment, the Alliance changed markedly from a military coalition designed for positional warfare against the forces of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, to an expeditionary, outward-looking organisation. Forces were refashioned for light interventions, underpinned by US military doctrine, power and supplies, against poorly armed adversaries. Delegates heard how member states made wholesale reductions in their own force structures, military budgets, national infrastructures and uniformed force designs in anticipation of NATO becoming a diplomatic venue for extending liberal order by creating better security frameworks in potential partner countries. In this period, the organisation rapidly grew to 29 member states, undertook constabulary

operations far from its traditional areas of interest, and redesigned itself for expeditionary interventions, acting as the force integrator in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Russian invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, followed by actions in Syria, shook the Alliance to its core, and it took some time for the organisation to adapt. According to some participants, a single strategic aim of the Alliance appears to be absent from NATO, and if it does exist, it does not make for a compelling narrative that is capable of galvanizing members to a single cause. Such conclusions make for some damning views of NATO – from US President Donald Trump and others – but the reality might well be different.

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The next NATO Summit is due to take place between 11 and 12 July 2018 in Brussels, following previous meetings in Cardiff (2014), Warsaw (2016) and Brussels (2017). Given Russia's persistent approach to NATO, security challenges on the Alliance's Northern,

Eastern and Southern frontiers, as well as global challenges further abroad, the agenda for state leaders in summer 2018 could easily become too broad to be manageable.

The Brussels Summit Agenda: Staking Out the Ground

Participants at the seminar heard from NATO officials that there will be five themes for the 2018 summit: deterrence and defence posture, stability in the neighbourhood, the EU/NATO partnership, modernisation, and burden sharing.

On deterrence and defence, the aim appears to be achieving ratification of a concept that will enable the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the highest office within NATO, to deter threats inside their area of responsibility: mainland continental Europe, the North Atlantic and the High North. At the heart of the plan sit new, extremely high-readiness forces that would enable rapid reinforcement across the theatre with a nominated and notified force structure consisting of 30 land warfare formations, 30 air wings, and 30 maritime platforms, each with the ability to conduct kinetic military operations on the authorisation of SACEUR. Such a force structure would be a pragmatic on-call grouping of first-responders, able to react to rapidly evolving situations, acknowledging that the majority of the Alliance's forces under the Graduated Response Plans take time to achieve full readiness and deploy. However, this must be balanced

Flags of NATO member states outside the Alliance's headquarters in Brussels, where the 2018 Summit will be held between 11 and 12 July. *Courtesy of US Department of Defense/Wikimedia*

against what is possible, since the costs of increasing readiness of all forces across the Alliance appears to be cost-prohibitive to many states.

The second theme of the summit will be stability in the NATO neighbourhood. This area contains a myriad of challenges in matching the historical aspiration of an 'open-door' membership policy with the reality of checks and balances for new members, as well as addressing Russia's attitude to the accession of certain states to the Alliance. Macedonia, which, in order to placate the Greeks, might be formally included as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as it is in the UN and other international organisations. Bosnia and Herzegovina are close to the tripwire for membership, having met all necessary military conditions but not the political ones, yet. The issue of dealing with potential Russian responses to any

invitations for Georgia and Ukraine remains outstanding. The complex issues associated with each of these potential members, along with differing national agendas among member states makes consensus unlikely.

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Capacity building on NATO's Southern flank also falls within this

summit theme. Building internal capacity in Tunisia, and potentially Libya, is needed to satisfy the increasing inclination to mitigate security challenges of mass migration and violent extremism, which are viewed as a top priority from states on the Mediterranean. NATO members will also need to decide how to adjust their current activities in Iraq. It appears that there is now sufficient support to formalise a NATO mission in Iraq, manned through the NATO Response Force process and formally funded. This would represent a major step forward in supporting the US strategy in the Middle East.

The third agenda item in Brussels will be the EU/NATO partnership. Despite differing national agendas, particularly between Germany and France, over how the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

arrangement for the EU will work, NATO continues to press hard on a number of measures towards formalising EU/NATO interoperability in the military and decision-making domains. Solutions to three problem areas will need to be agreed upon from a NATO perspective: coherence of force generation for military formations between NATO and the EU, ensuring the forces generated for the EU are available to NATO, and appropriate transparency between the two organisations. Gaining agreement will again be complex, but issues over mobility within Europe might be key to finally achieving a workable solution that suits both parties.

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The penultimate summit agenda item concerns NATO modernisation, largely related to the NATO Command Structure review (NCS). Delegates heard that the Alliance accepts that current military decision-making structures do not allow decisions to be made in a timeframe that is relevant to the way in which Russia and other adversaries undertake action. As such, the summit is expected to ratify an amended command structure that meets contemporary needs. Plans exist for a new Atlantic Command, a new Logistics Command and some reallocation of duties between current Joint Force Commands (JFC Brunssum and JFC Naples) as well as Component Commanders (Maritime in Northwood, UK; Air in Germany; and Land Command in Izmir, Turkey). Further land and exercise commands have not been ruled out at this stage and details on

how individual commands might be strengthened or reduced are unclear and are the subject of continuing work. It was clear from discussions that the summit will announce the key findings of the review and ratify new arrangements, but that the locations, people and structures will take some time to deliver. This is not wholly unexpected.

Member states are simply unable to place scarce cyber experts at the Alliance's disposal on a full-time basis

Finally, the summit will have to address burden sharing, which is not simply an extension of the drive for greater military spending by member states towards the target of 2% of GDP, set by NATO at the Newport/Cardiff summit in 2014. The NATO Defence Planning Process identified a number of key capability shortfalls and apportioned lead states to spearhead overcoming them. Actions by some states, including the UK, in addressing these gaps has fallen short of what is required, and it seems likely that the Brussels summit may go as far as to 'name-and-shame' those Allies who are failing to live up to their commitments. Seminar participants were unanimous in their agreement that the current discussion over burden sharing cannot simply be attributed to President Trump's position on the issue, but is more a reflection of a realisation of the threat faced from Russia.

The NATO Command Structure Review: More Fit for Purpose?

The results and findings of the NCS are likely to be ratified at the Brussels Summit in the summer of 2018. One of the key outcomes of the NCS appears to be the creation of a new North Atlantic Command Headquarters – a direct acknowledgement of the changing

threat posed by Russia in Northern Europe, the High North, the Arctic and to resupply lines in the North Atlantic. Details are scarce and the creation of an additional headquarters may not be sufficient to deal with the complexity of the threat now posed by Russia, as Moscow uses threshold warfare and grey zone activities to undermine the Alliance. In addition, it appears that NATO will also have a new Logistics Command as part of its component structure – permitted in Alliance doctrine but absent from the formal structure until now.

It seems likely that the new Atlantic Command will form key linkages with the US Navy through Fleet Forces Command and the recently announced reconstituted US Second Fleet, but would not have a permanently manned, full staff. Instead, a core standing element might provide connectivity, coherence and planning functions for the region, while only being activated in times of crisis. As ever with such arrangements, identifying the triggers for such activation becomes problematic, specifically when adversaries conduct military activities below the thresholds for formal, pre-determined military responses. There is a danger that activating the command could itself become escalatory rather than simply a command and control tool: in such circumstances the utility of the new command would be much reduced as a military lever.

Far from being a prisoner of its own history, NATO has been rapidly adapting to rude shocks that have challenged preconceived notions of Europe and regional security

New structures notwithstanding, many seminar delegates expressed concerns regarding the current Joint Force Command structure, which is perceived as focusing on deployability (for expeditionary operations) rather

than preparing to counter threats and challenges within Europe. It was clear that commands must refocus their efforts for an internal threat dynamic. As one participant noted, 'It simply does not work when JFC Brunssum [the command responsible for the Eastern and Northern borders of the Alliance area] knows more about Afghanistan and Iraq than it does about Russia and the High North'. Given that it is now some years since NATO pulled back from large-scale expeditionary operations and that Russia has now emerged as a key strategic challenger, many participants continued to express support for more regional commands, with local experience, knowledge and connections that could better contextualise challenges and threats to their own areas, some going so far as to call for a PESCO-type arrangement that would enable local coalitions within the overall NATO framework. It was acknowledged that historically, such arrangements have actually undermined the long-term cohesion of alliances.

The component commands will continue to function and, in some cases, expand. Maritime command in particular, will be strengthened. Their roles will start to shift from advocating their case to SACEUR, to delivery of force elements to JFCs, and in shaping the battlespace against day-to-day challenges. NATO Air Command will formally take on the role of managing space activities for the Alliance, but cyber operations will remain the responsibility of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) with cells of experts available to subordinate commands. This was a trend among major cyber powers five years ago, many of whom have since delegated cyber actions to a lower level and have integrated cyber more widely throughout their structures. While this might be an aspiration for NATO, it is not a practical or pragmatic plan. Member states are simply unable to place scarce cyber experts at the Alliance's disposal on a full-time basis when many have ongoing national cyber security challenges to overcome.

Today's command structure could be described as light and agile – ideally suited to time-limited expeditionary operations. Those facets also makes the structure fragile and lacking resilience in the face of multi-faceted challenges. The new structure has the potential to add weight and rigour to decision-making, but recently member states have not provided the manpower, expertise or equipment to ensure new structures function as designed. The result has been an imperfect solution, implemented on the cheap. There is a significant danger of perpetuating the problems of NATO command processes and systems through lack of commitment by member states. The Brussels Summit might make the right organisational decisions, but success will be determined by how its plans are supported and implemented by states and services.

Conclusions

The Alliance is almost unrecognisable from 36 months ago. Far from being a prisoner of its own history, NATO has been rapidly adapting to rude shocks that have challenged preconceived notions of Europe and regional security. The agenda for Brussels reflects the tensions resulting from policies on 'open-door' membership, but seems to make room for dealing with contemporary threats and pragmatic preparations for potential new challenges. Decision-making at the political level has been demonstrated as resilient and pacey, most recently in reactions to the nerve agent attack in Salisbury, UK. The Alliance continues to acquit itself most satisfactorily, and beyond the expectations of many.

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But while NATO appears to have a good story to tell, implementing the new policy positions will be more problematic and more complex. If there is strategic coherence in national security strategies and positions, certainly evident between recently issued policies in London, Paris and Washington, the complexity in making such ambition a reality with a credible deterrence structure is more challenging with 29 voices and agendas at the table. Nonetheless, differences in national policy and postures are small. What is more difficult is gaining consensus on what to do about it.

The Alliance is not telling this story however, and appears continually lost in an internally focused conversation that seems to neglect the subject of its deterrence posture, undermining the strong position that it actually holds diplomatically, politically and militarily. Neither is the Alliance good at holding to account individual states for their actions on filling capability gaps or manning and equipping the command structures determined by political leaders to be key.

The Brussels Summit is therefore, perhaps, more important than many in the Alliance's history. It must galvanise and hold states to account while not endangering the more precarious arrangements of decision-making and preparations for action. It is perhaps not NATO's agenda that must be examined, but rather the actions of states, national budgets and forces that follow the July meeting. NATO is doing well as an organisation: but that in itself does not make success a preordained right.

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Peter is Director of Military Sciences and a Senior Research Fellow at RUSI. This work is presented within the Security and Defense in Northern Europe research programme, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defense and is a collaborative effort of the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the German Council on Foreign Relations and RUSI.