



Business as Usual in Brussels? NATO's strategic outlook under Trump

Aylin Matlé and Alessandro Scheffler Corvaja

Key Points

- Trump and his initial cast of advisors caused a great deal of insecurity inside NATO. The sustained U.S. engagement in the East, the absence of a quick rapprochement with Russia and the reputable new national security team have greatly diminished this early anxiety.
- The administration's NATO priorities are greater engagement in counter-terrorism and more equal burden-sharing. Both can have either positive or negative effects for NATO: Progress on both fronts could significantly strengthen the Alliance, but they remain highly controversial and could backfire and undermine Alliance cohesion.
- In the East, allies are realizing that a credible conventional deterrence depends not just on the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) established in Warsaw, but on NATO's ability to rapidly reinforce it in case of a crisis. This requires heavy investment in the wider and more general follow-on forces.
- While the deterrence-leg of Warsaw's dual-track strategy is well on its way, dialogue with Russia remains difficult. The sour relations might mean that any initiatives for greater dialogue have to come from Europe.
- In the South, NATO remains in soul-searching mode. Having limited its own ambition to a supporting role, its options are heavily constrained by the conflicting interests and priorities of its members.
- No decision on a new Strategic Concept can be expected at the mini-Summit in May. But allies will start pushing for a mandate to prepare a new Concept by the time of NATO's 70th anniversary in 2019.
- All of these points call for more German leadership. Instead of quarreling over the 2%, Berlin should take a serious look at its armed forces, which provide ample opportunity for investment and improvement.

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U.S. priorities are counter-terrorism and burden-sharing.

Both can have unifying and divisive effects.

In the run-up to NATO's mini-Summit in Brussels on May 25th, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation invited a selected group of seventeen experts and officials from eleven member states to its annual workshop on NATO's strategic agenda. Discussions concentrated on the implementation of the Warsaw Summit decisions and the impact of President Trump on the Alliance. Participants were asked to provide concrete recommendations for German policymakers on how Berlin could contribute to strengthening NATO. The workshop, which was convened in its fourth iteration, took place at the Foundation's conference venue in Cadenabbia, Italy. To facilitate an open dialogue, discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.¹

Introduction: What to make of Trump's NATO policy

The election of Donald Trump to President of the United States has caused a great deal of anxiety within the Alliance. That Trump had made an explicit anti-NATO stance part of his foreign policy platform promised nothing good for the Alliance. To the relief of the allies, however, the greatest fears about U.S. NATO policy have not materialized thus far. The initially suspected US-Russian "deal" at the expense of European security seems increasingly unlikely today. To the contrary, the administration has avoided any signs of acquiescence towards Russia. Despite Trump's initial questioning of U.S. commitment to Article 5, he has sustained the strong U.S. engagement on NATO's Eastern flank: the persistent rotational presence of an U.S. armored brigade in Poland as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), U.S. support to the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), to which the U.S. provides key enablers such as strategic airlift, air refueling, and special operations forces, and the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which funds bilateral U.S. activities in Central and Eastern Europe. To Europeans, this has served as a first litmus test on the reliability of the current administration.

The same holds for Trump's national security appointments: after the ouster of Michael Flynn and Steven Bannon's removal from the National Security Council, the general impression is that of "the adults taking charge". Allies are pleased with the remaining team around Pence, Mattis and McMaster, who have gone out of their way to reassure partners about the administration's intentions. Uncertainty nevertheless has not completely disappeared, especially about the degree to which Trump really trusts these advisors and which influence Bannon and the Strategic Initiatives Group will continue to exert. This uncertainty about who is calling the shots is exacerbated by the lack of staffing in the administration and Trump's limited reliance on established experts.

The premier goals for the United States vis-a-vis NATO will be more equal burden-sharing and more engagement in counter-terrorism. With this agenda in mind, Trump could become both a unifying and divisive force for NATO – especially during election seasons in European states whose publics are almost united in their rejection of Trump.

If the administration can get allies to spend more on defense and move towards the 2% metric established in Wales, this would be a boon for the Alliance and significantly improve European capabilities. Allies are certainly feeling that the administration is serious and that Trump is willing to take the pressure to new levels. Accordingly, they have made first steps in this direction – although some had already been decided upon before Trump's election. At the same time, a counter-narrative to U.S. pressure is already emerging – not only in Germany. Many allies criticize the 2% goal as too

mechanical and doubt if more money translates into more security. Given the size of the necessary increases, some are also concerned about their defense sector's actual absorption capacity and doubt additional investments will contribute to NATO's overall capability. The strong aversion to Trump in most European publics might also induce governments to spend more, but invest outside NATO, e.g. in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, in which case Trump's cajoling would backfire for NATO.

Trump's criticism of NATO's lack of action in the field of counter-terrorism matches the complaints of many allies in NATO's "Southern" camp, for whom the biggest threat to their security is not Russia but rather the instability on NATO's Southern flank. If more was to happen on this front, it could potentially strengthen NATO's cohesion by supporting the Southern allies. First steps have already been taken: The U.S. has proposed the creation of a NATO counter-terrorism "Czar" and is apparently increasing the pressure on NATO to officially join the Anti-Daesh coalition in the run-up to May 25th – most likely by a more active involvement of the AWACS. Yet – as is evidenced by the very varied response of allies to the American strike on Syria – greater action in the Middle East could also be highly divisive for the Alliance.

NATO's "Southern" challenge

Conventional Deterrence: Focus on Follow-on Forces

The Wales decisions and the Readiness Action Plan have been fully implemented by now. The NATO Response Force has been tripled and the "Spearhead", the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, has been established with lead elements that can deploy within 72 hours. The NATO Force Integration Units are in place as well. The number of exercises has tripled to 246 in 2016, of which more than 80 were in support of reassurance. The implementation of the Warsaw decisions is also well on its way: In Central and North-Eastern Europe, the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), consisting of four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups, will be ready by the end of June. Similarly, in South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, the Tailored Forward Presence – consisting of a Romanian-led multinational framework brigade – and a stronger allied air and maritime posture are under way. Working patterns on hybrid threats have been established with the EU and a NATO hub for the South at JFC Naples has been agreed to and is being implemented.

Glass half full: The current posture would have been unimaginable in 2014.

While this scorecard presents a significant success story, much remains to be done. The Warsaw Summit and the establishment of the EFP have often been characterized as moving from reassurance – as established in Wales and embodied in the Readiness Action Plan – to deterrence. As a stand-alone force, however, the EFP battlegroups are 'sitting ducks' and cannot constitute a meaningful deterrent. To function as the intended 'tripwire', they depend entirely on the follow-on forces the Alliance is able to muster once the EFP comes under pressure. It is this ability for rapid reinforcement that underwrites the credibility of NATO's conventional deterrence. Three challenges stand out in this regard.

Glass half empty: the EFP are more sitting ducks than tripwire.

The first challenge consists of the readiness and deployability of the follow-on forces: Can member states deploy the complete VJTF quickly enough? Even more serious doubts about NATO's credibility exist regarding the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the wider follow-on forces. In theory, these forces are in place, but it is unclear if they are trained and combat ready. After years of focus on few expeditionary elements, equipment and training levels in the general force remain very low. In addition, the VJTF and the EFP are often drawing resources from the general force. The required recapitalization of the general force alone will suffice

Rapid reinforcement remains a challenge.

to take up whatever is missing to reach the 2% metric. But even in the case of a “Trump effect”, this recapitalization cannot happen overnight.

The second challenge is NATO’s actual capability to conduct operations of the magnitude required for collective defense. During the last decade, NATO was focused on counter-insurgency missions that extended up to the brigade level at a maximum. In Article 5 operations, we are instead talking about high intensity warfare up to the multi-corps level. A functional review of NATO’s command structure for the East is already underway and has shown that considerable command and control issues exist which require urgent fixing. While one of the conclusions will likely be the call for a greater regionalization / geographical functionalization of the command structure, it will become clear that NATO’s command structure requires substantial investment. After years of decreasing NATO military budgets and a focus on operations, nations have to turn the ship and pay up to support NATO’s infrastructure, which only amounts to less than 1% of overall NATO defense spending anyway.

NATO’s Command Structure is in need of reform – and investment.

The third challenge pertains to a very prominent, but by now almost completely forgotten part of the Warsaw strategy: dialogue with Russia. To avoid locking into a permanent conflict with Russia, but also because the Alliance always recognized that it will take several years to get a proper deterrence framework in place, Warsaw was also very much about a balance between deterrence and dialogue. The reinforcement of NATO’s deterrence posture was therefore accompanied by an explicit offer for dialogue, echoing NATO’s historic Harmel report. So far, this dialogue has yielded little results on the political level and remains difficult. Yet it seems as if there are some promising starts in the field of risk reduction and transparency, and several meetings of the NATO-Russia Council have been held since the Warsaw Summit. While recognizing that meaningful rapprochement depends on Russia adopting a less threatening stance, the Alliance should continue to further explore such avenues of dialogue.

Dialogue with Russia remains elusive.

Nuclear Deterrence: Time to start thinking

The Warsaw Summit communique had offered firm, if not entirely new, language on nuclear deterrence and reaffirmed NATO as a nuclear Alliance. Yet, besides this exercise in declaratory policy, little progress has been made since. While it was important to reaffirm NATO’s nuclear mission, the Alliance continues to suffer from a dearth of thinking about the challenges of modern nuclear deterrence. This is particularly dangerous since Russian thinking moves much more continuously from the conventional to the nuclear. At the same time, two upcoming issues may make it much more difficult to uphold the current “nuclear silence”: In the United States, Congress is starting to mandate consequences for Russia’s alleged violations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. At worst, these may include the withdrawal from the treaty. In Germany, with the possible replacement of the Tornado, the debate about nuclear sharing, which had been postponed by the decision to prolong the lives of the DCA tornados for as long as possible, might be revived. At this point, allies will also not be spared from a debate about which useful military role – in addition to its political symbolic role – nuclear sharing can play in deterring a technologically advanced nuclear weapon state. This will include difficult questions about the usability and survivability of the current DCAs.

Nuclear issues will become increasingly hard to ignore.

How should the Alliance deal with Russian misbehavior in the nuclear realm now that the prospect of a rapid US-Russian nuclear “deal” has radically diminished? Even while Russian non-compliance persists, it is hard to imagine any “punitive” measures. Forgoing NATO’s „Three Nos” by expanding nuclear sharing, introducing

Shaming Russia for its misbehavior will help to muster domestic support.

a new theater nuclear system in a tit-for-tat-manner, or even a greater reliance on conventional prompt strike would all be a considerable test to NATO's cohesion. It would also hardly evoke Russian compliance. At this point in time, NATO, and the U.S. in particular, simply have no other option than focusing on arms control, while providing a credible conventional deterrence and a resilient and survivable nuclear deterrent. Russia's willingness to enter into a meaningful arms-control agreement will ultimately depend on whether it believes it has the upper hand. Given NATO's technological edge, it should be able to offer concessions Russia might deem attractive enough to start discussions – especially if the European member states really were to invest much more in conventional deterrence. To maintain at least moderate levels of domestic support in European member states, allies should shame Russia more actively for its misbehavior and emphasize the "allied" dimension of nuclear sharing, e.g. by increasing the number of states contributing non-nuclear means in support of nuclear sharing.

Securing the Southern Flank: Which Role for NATO?

NATO continues to grapple with its role in the South.

Conflict and instability on NATO's Southern flank continue to pose a fundamental challenge to the security of the Alliance. Their repercussions in the form of terrorism and migration remain high on the political agenda of the member states and present a destabilizing factor within national political systems. As the premier transatlantic security institution, NATO needs to respond to challenges to the security of its members if it wants to remain relevant. While the Alliance has found consensus on a concept for the crisis on its Eastern flank in a balance between deterrence and dialogue, NATO's contribution to dealing with challenges in the South remains fuzzy.

The immediate aftermath of the illegal annexation of Crimea saw the emergence of an "Eastern" and a "Southern" camp within the Alliance. The Southerners did not feel particularly threatened by Russia and opposed an exclusive focus of NATO on its Eastern flank – especially as the Alliance lacked any concept for countering threats in the South. To some degree, this contention mirrored the competition between crisis management and collective defense in the 2000s. To accommodate its "Southern" member states, at its Warsaw Summit the Alliance presented its so-called "360°" approach to projecting stability, which included keeping the VJTF open for use in crisis management and concentrating on Defence Capacity Building in the framework of the Defence and Security-Related Capacity Building Initiative. By 2017, the competition between "East" and "South" has become much less salient. Having benefited from serious allied engagement since 2014, NATO's Central and Eastern member states understand that alliance solidarity is a two-way street and are now much more open to potential engagement in the South than they used to be.

NATO's lack of action depends mostly on Southerners themselves.

At the same time, the conceptual uncertainty about NATO's potential role in the South persists. So far, the search for a role that plays on NATO's strengths – and not on its weaknesses – and is sustainable over time has remained elusive. Even the Southerners themselves do not have a clear idea about what NATO should do. Hardly anyone sees a leadership role for NATO in the South as it could be counterproductive and because some member states prefer to see greater EU engagement there. Thus, it seems likely that the Alliance will continue to stabilize Afghanistan – European member states are already calling for prolonging the Resolute Support mission – and wait for specific calls for support by countries from the region.

The current U.S. pressure to get NATO to become an active and official member of the Global Coalition against Daesh will not lead to significant change and likely pro-

NATO's contributions will remain more of the same.

duce more of the same. Given the conflicting interests on the ground, member states are likely to tie any direct participation of the AWACS to such caveats and red cards as to render it effectively meaningless. While nations might come around to accept the U.S. idea of a NATO counter-terrorism "czar", the post will remain irrelevant without a reporting division. NATO will therefore continue contributing to the efforts of member states or groups of member states by providing intelligence sharing and situational awareness – including through its new hub in Naples – and Defence Capacity Building. But in the absence of big fix solutions, these will hardly be game changers.

A European Pillar inside NATO: Old wine in new bottles?

While European allies ought to contribute more to transatlantic burden-sharing, an assessment of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy is rather sobering. In effect, even the renewed commitment to the "Permanent Structured Cooperation" (PESCO) on March 6 this year is little more than a new bumper sticker that does not address the member states real needs, i.e. capabilities. In essence, the new initiative is more about establishing new structures than about guaranteeing that a) national military capabilities will be increased and b) these individual national capabilities will be streamlined so as to facilitate multinational defense cooperation.

NATO and EU defense planning need to link.

The upcoming Brexit in 2019 will make closer NATO-EU cooperation even more important. In light of the current capability shortcomings of the EU of soon to be 27, European defense remains impossible without the UK and the United States. Greater harmony needs to be established between the EU's CSDP and NATO, and defense and security tasks must be divided clearly between the two bodies. The EU should deliver more on crisis management, especially when it comes to the comprehensive approach, while NATO ought to continue delivering on (nuclear) deterrence and defense. One way to support this cooperation would be to link NATO's Defense Planning Process to the proposed European Defense Fund. If a "Trump effect" should really lead to greater defense spending across Europe, it must be ensured that countries make the most of this spending and that any decoupling is avoided. Focusing EU and NATO investment on the necessary improvements in the general force can have a positive effect for both institutions and would also do much to further improve U.S.-European relations.

Readjusting NATO's "global partnerships" – Towards a pragmatic approach

NATO has to keep an eye on Asia-Pacific.

NATO should think carefully about the stance it wants to adopt vis-a-vis the Asia-Pacific region. To some degree, the "Asia-Pacific" narrative has been buried within the Alliance – both because the United States did not push very hard for it and because the partners in the region have shown limited interest in partnering with NATO. Nevertheless, the Alliance should not turn its back on the region altogether and maintain and broaden its knowledge about this critical region and its security concerns. Keeping a watchful eye does not necessarily have to translate into operational engagement. Keeping political channels of communication open to remain aware of current and prospective security issues will prevent being caught off-guard by a crisis. The most apparent added value NATO could offer the region is of political nature; given its new focus on defense and deterrence, the Alliance could share lessons learned with the region, including consultations about cyber and digital security. Facilitating talks about regional but also global security could work to the Alliance's and the respective partner countries' benefit.

Joint exercises will be required to maintain interoperability.

In the region, NATO should re-focus on institutionalizing political consultations with those countries it shares most common interests with: Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. While NATO has committed to maintaining the level of interoperability reached in Afghanistan, it will remain hard to preserve in the absence of common operations. Joint exercises should therefore be pursued more actively to uphold interoperability. To strengthen ties to partner countries, NATO should establish a liaison office in Japan and South Korea. This would not entail high political and financial costs but could upgrade and thus enhance the Alliance's relation with those countries. In the end and as with much else regarding the future course of NATO, the Alliance has to wait for Washington to make up its mind about which strategy (if any at all) it wants to adopt towards the Asia-Pacific. As a general conclusion, the Alliance should focus its partnerships in Asia and elsewhere more on its own interests. This implies concentrating on those countries identified as "anchor" states and offering them a package that is aimed at NATO's interests – instead of the current self-differentiation, where partners can choose freely from the partnership menu.

Time for a New Strategic Concept?

Officials remain skeptical about a new Strategic Concept.

Whether or not the radically changed security environment on Europe's Eastern and Southern flanks requires a new Strategic Concept has been a recurrent topic of debate since 2014. While defense intellectuals have long argued that it is unavoidable, officials have been more cautious: For many member states' representatives, a concept is required, but not at this point in time. Like most NATO officials they are skeptical whether a meaningful strategic consensus can be forged in the current political climate.

The elaboration of the Concept could serve as a means to engage the U.S.

Despite this reluctance from the official side, it is worth to consider the arguments in favor of a new Strategic Concept. Most importantly, the process of its elaboration could serve as a means to engage the Trump administration and recommit the U.S. to its leadership role in the Alliance. The decision to develop a new Concept would ideally convey two main messages: First, while priorities might vary, allies share a basic common understanding of the current regional security environment. The second message would be that allies also agree on the basic tasks – and to some extent even strategies – that follow from this security environment. The concept could thus show that the differences between "Easterners" and "Southerners" have by now largely been resolved. After all, the Eastern member states no longer insist on an exclusive focus on Russia, and the Southern camp is actively contributing to supporting reassurance and deterrence on the Eastern flank.

Any new concept would have to re-emphasize Article 5.

Any new Strategic Concept must revise a key point: Russia is no longer a partner of NATO – and has not been one prior to the "watershed" year 2014. Acknowledging this change makes clear that the main core task must be collective defense. The new Strategic Concept would underscore the key relevance of Article 5, thus reversing the trend of downplaying the importance of territorial defense that dominated since the end of the Cold War. To mirror the importance of the South, the current core tasks two and three, crisis management and partnerships, should be merged into a second core task: Projecting stability through crisis management, security assistance, and partnerships. After all, they share the same goal: to export security (and know-how). A third and somewhat new task could be resilience, where allies could draw from the Warsaw declaration. As a function of collective defense, resilience should be understood as the ability to go "back to normal" as quickly as possible after a disruption – ideally also learning and improving from each event. While it is essentially part of a "deterrence by denial", the necessity to interact with a variety of other actors would justify seeing it as a core task in its own right.

For a “birthday”-concept, the clock is already ticking.

It is unlikely that the process for a new Strategic Concept will be launched at the mini-Summit in May. Yet, as the policies of the administration become clearer, allies can be expected to start pushing for the mandate for a new Strategic Concept that would ideally be ready by the time of NATO’s 70th anniversary in 2019. This would mean that thinking about the process would have to start shortly after the summit in May. The upcoming mini-Summit could be used to present the new U.S. administration with the prospect and advantages of drafting a new strategy.

Recommendations

Following from the analysis above, several recommendations emerged for European allies in general and for Germany in particular:

European initiatives needed to engage the Trump administration.

- European allies should engage the Trump administration with their own ideas on how to make NATO fit for purpose. Commissioning and drafting a new Strategic Concept would be just one way to do this. In general, European allies should make the case why the Alliance benefits all members, how they are contributing to Alliance security and how they would seek to further strengthen NATO.
- NATO will become increasingly regional. Northern, Central and Eastern Europeans are likely to concentrate on conventional deterrence in the East, while “Southerners” will continue to focus on an expeditionary posture that optimally prepares for crisis management and security assistance missions. These preferences will be echoed in a more regionalized NATO Command Structure, in which allies will seek most billets in their likely area of operations. For Germany as NATO’s second biggest member state, this regionalization is not an option. While engagement in conventional deterrence in the East plays to German preferences – and features prominently in plans for the future structure of the Bundeswehr – German leadership will require an armed force that is deployable in multiple scenarios, including the South. Similarly, Germany will not have the luxury to pick one regional command structure, but has to invest in both.
- As one of the few countries that are likely to be invested to a greater extent with regard to both the East and the South, Germany will play a crucial role as an enabler of a more integrated European defense – which would benefit both the EU and NATO. If the Bundeswehr is to receive significantly higher funding in the upcoming years – including through access to the European Defence Fund – it should use a fair share of these resources to deepen this integration and ensure maximum interoperability between European forces. More than today, cooperation should follow military need rather than political opportunity, and should concentrate on those fields where there is an acknowledged lack of European capability. Such shortcomings include helicopters, air refueling, medical evacuation, and JISR capacities which are primarily provided by the United States for the time being.
- The Bundeswehr requires significant investment. The peace dividend combined with 15 years of operations have turned the Bundeswehr into a hollow force. Building up a modern, well-equipped and trained professional force with appropriate levels of readiness is essential to provide for the necessary follow-on forces that underwrite NATO’s conventional deterrence. Combined with its central role in NATO Command Structures and as a framework nation, this requires steady increases in the defense budget. Germany should therefore stick to the Chancellor’s commitment to achieve the 2% goal by 2024 – not because Trump demands it, but because it makes good strategic sense. Even if the goal is mechanical, it has always been so, and has as

Germany has to be engaged on the Eastern and Southern flank.

Moving towards 2% is in Germany’s strategic interest.

such been confirmed by successive German governments – including those led by or involving Social-Democrats. Reneging on this commitment by changing the metrics would completely undermine the credibility of German commitments. While absorption capacity of the defense sector remains a problem, Germany should not dismiss the 2% as outright impossible as there are many fields where investment options are both readily available and dearly required, such as ammunition stocks.

- Germany also has to invest more intellectual energy into the “dialogue” aspect of the Warsaw strategy. Given the current climate in the United States, any moves towards Russia have to come from European NATO members. That does not mean that Germany should fall into the old trap of thinking that NATO-Russia dialogue today is about the reestablishment of a partnership. Rather, it is about what NATO wants from Russia, e.g. increased transparency on its military posture and the end of snap exercises, and what NATO can offer Russia in return – without jeopardizing its deterrence in the East. Particularly new technologies, which are not an integral part of operational planning today and in which NATO possesses a considerable edge over Russia – such as conventional global strike –, can be used to offer Russia limitations that might actually prove valuable enough to get Russia to the table.
- Regarding nuclear deterrence, the Luftwaffe has to do its homework and start thinking about the future of the Dual-Capable Aircraft. The unlimited life-time extension for the DCA-Tornados was the right decision at a time when nuclear sharing as a whole was under serious pressure. Today however, as Russia forces NATO to adapt its conventional and nuclear posture, being serious about such a posture means being honest about the usability and survivability of one’s own assets – and thus starting to think about a replacement for the 30-year old DCA-Tornados.

Dialogue with Russia should not be forgotten.

The replacement of the DCA-Tornados must be considered.

1| For the previous iterations, please see “After the Wales Summit: An Assessment of NATO’s Strategic Agenda”, in: *Facts & Findings*, No. 162, November 2014, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.39528/>, “From Wales to Warsaw: A New Normal for NATO?”, in: *Facts & Findings*, No. 187, October 2015, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.42717/>, “Beyond Deterrence: NATO’s Agenda after Warsaw”, in: *Facts & Findings*, No. 224, October 2016, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.46589/>.

Authors

Aylin Matlé is working towards a PhD on the role of the U.S. in NATO during the Obama presidency. In addition, she is an external lecturer at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. She holds an M.A. in War Studies from King's College London and is a member of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Young Foreign Policy Experts Working Group.

Alessandro Scheffler Corvaja is a member of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Young Foreign Policy Experts Working Group. He holds a Master of Letters in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

Contact:

Dr. Patrick Keller

Coordinator Foreign & Security Policy

Department of European and International Cooperation

Phone: +49(0)30/26996-3510

Email: patrick.keller@kas.de

Postal address: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 10907 Berlin

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www.kas.de



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