

## NATO after its Brussels Summit: Operational Progress amidst Strategic Confusion

---

*Aylin Matlé / Alessandro Scheffler Corvaja*

Immediately after the NATO Summit in Brussels on July 11 and 12th 2018, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation invited a selected group of sixteen experts and officials from ten member states to its annual workshop on NATO's strategic agenda. Discussions focused on the Summit outcome and the ongoing implementation of NATO's Wales and Warsaw decisions. Participants were asked to provide concrete recommendations for German policy-makers on how Berlin could contribute to strengthening NATO's strategic outlook. The workshop, which was convened in its fifth 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. The following key take-aways summarize the main outcomes of the summit as well as the road ahead for the Alliance:

- ▶ Since its Wales Summit in 2014, NATO has adjusted its focus and posture to respond to a re-emerging external threat on its Eastern Flank by bolstering the Alliance's deterrence and defense posture. Today the Alliance is also facing the internal challenge of nationalist, populist and authoritarian tendencies unfolding in many of its member states. Channeling a pro-Kremlin worldview – and often sponsored by the Kremlin – these illiberal developments challenge both NATO's strategic consensus and its self-image as an Alliance consisting of democratic, pluralistic states guided by the principles of the rule of law.
- ▶ NATO's Brussels Summit was therefore evidence of a paradoxical development: While the Alliance is deeply troubled by the divisions emerging between its member states at the political level, these developments have not had a negative impact on actual Alliance policy and the implementation of the Wales and Warsaw decisions regarding the rebuilding of a credible collective defence thus far.
- ▶ With the rapid-response elements and the Enhanced Forward Presence tripwire now in place, Alliance efforts are being shifting towards follow-on forces. Given the overall readiness of NATO's general forces, the task is thus becoming one of force generation. While the "Four Thirties"-Initiative is valuable, allies require a long-term strategy and substantial increases in defence spending in order to meet the self-imposed goals of generating follow-on forces. All force generation efforts, national or otherwise, ought to prioritize efficacy over cost-saving approaches such as NATO's own Smart Defence initiative. At the same time, it is also important to remain realistic: It is unclear whether the "Four Thirties"-initiative, which is supposed to be implemented on top of force formations such as NRF and VJTF, is truly achievable in the aspired timeframe (2020) considering each member state's single set of forces.
- ▶ The NATO Command Structure reform is one of the landmarks of the summit and part of the larger effort to rebuild the Alliance's credibility in the realm of collective defence. By putting JFC Brunssum in charge of Article V operations in the North and East again, the reform leads to a de-facto regionalization of the Command Structure. This has many military advantages, but will have to be carefully managed lest NATO's political cohesion is undermined.

- › The EU-NATO partnership, which entered into a new era with the Joint Declaration of 2016, continues to evolve in a positive direction. Several new EU initiatives have the potential to boost European defence capabilities and their commitment to inclusiveness and complementarity to NATO marks an important success for Germany. Yet, closer EU-cooperation can only benefit NATO so long as these efforts are aimed at generating forces instead of establishing new structures.
- › NATO and most of its member states are still struggling to get a grip on the cyber domain. At the same time, decision-makers have understood that national and allied cyber capabilities have to be improved dramatically to be capable of resisting attacks from a domain that could potentially be devastating to the Alliance.
- › NATO allies have to re-evaluate their ongoing engagement in Afghanistan and refocus on preventing the country from becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. NATO allies should beware of the risk that an early withdrawal from Afghanistan would fundamentally undermined the Alliance's willingness and ability to conduct any more ambitious missions as part of its Projecting Stability pillar.
- › Allies' abstention from the Nuclear Ban Treaty and the clear U.S. commitment to extended deterrence in its recent U.S. Nuclear Posture Review are two important recent successes for NATO's nuclear enterprise. Yet the U.S. decision to withdraw from the INF-Treaty in response to Russian violations – especially if backed up with the deployment of new assets to Europe – puts the hard-fought consensus on NATO's nuclear posture at risk and may even challenge allied policy towards Russia altogether. It is in the interest of European allies to find a common response to recent developments regarding the INF as their security will be challenged most by the US and Russia dealing with the issue bilaterally.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

**Benjamin Fricke M.A.**

Desk Officer for Security Affairs  
European and International Cooperation

[benjamin.fricke@kas.de](mailto:benjamin.fricke@kas.de)



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>