



Multilateralism

# The End of Certainty

The Transatlantic Alliance Faces Great Challenges

Philipp Dienstbier

NATO has multilateralism in its DNA. But the principles of multilateralism are currently under pressure. In this difficult environment, the alliance must confront a number of internal and external challenges, from fairer burden-sharing, to strengthening its European pillar, to organising more effective alliance defence.

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The international community has, for several years now, been experiencing the end of multilateral certainties, especially with regards to the transatlantic security architecture. For over seventy years, NATO has formed the backbone of the peace order in Europe and North America. In doing so, it has built on firm multilateral principles, which are now coming under increasing pressure. Surprisingly, much of this pressure originates from the US, which was the main driving force behind the alliance at the beginning of the Cold War. US President Donald Trump has questioned the fundamental multilateral principles upon which the alliance was founded. For instance, he sows doubt about the indivisibility of the security of NATO member states and misinterprets the principle of reciprocity among allies as transactional compensation. With this rhetoric, Trump has shaken the alliance and triggered a political debate about the future of NATO.

But Trump is less cause than symbol of the US' fundamental reorientation, which has already had far-reaching consequences for the alliance, and which will continue with or without him. Given the greater American focus on the Indo-Pacific region and the escalating competition between the US and China, the US is reducing its involvement in the European theater and therefore expects greater contributions from the European members of NATO to secure peace in Europe and its vicinity. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further accelerate this fundamental shift within NATO.

In order to master this shift, NATO must tackle a number of challenges. Germany and its European allies should increase their defence contributions and promote the complementarity of

NATO and EU capabilities in order to strengthen the European component of the alliance. As a whole, the alliance must counteract the rise of rivaling great powers, especially Russia, by consolidating key capabilities, including nuclear deterrence, while maintaining the offer of dialogue with Moscow. Moreover, the alliance must maintain its ability to transform itself by meeting future unconventional security threats, such as the effects of pandemics, with targeted support to member states.

### **NATO: A Prime Example of Multilateral Cooperation**

NATO embodies the fundamental values of multilateralism as few other organisations do. The characteristic that makes NATO a special multilateral organisation is that it is organised around joint agreements and defined rules, which are based on the qualitative values of multilateralism, especially the principles of indivisibility and reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

The principle of indivisibility as a foundation of multilateralism provides for an inclusive order for participating states in which players are treated equally. A collective defence system such as NATO has this basic value written into its very DNA. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, in which the parties commit to treating an attack on one or more members as an attack on all of them, shows that NATO views peace and security in Europe and North America as indivisible – no member state can be at peace when another is at war.<sup>2</sup>

The alliance is also built upon the principle of reciprocity, which undergirds multilateral

cooperation mechanisms as well. NATO member states pledge other allies their support and enjoy their assistance in return. But the support obligation in Article 5 is not a quid pro quo – that is, it is not based on transactional compensation. Instead, the idea of collective defence is guided by the conviction that, over long periods of time, equal benefits will accrue to all members. These benefits cannot be measured in terms of direct compensation for the defence of allies. Instead, the principle of reciprocity in NATO creates a general added value that ultimately benefits all members of the system of collective defence.

### **The principle of reciprocity in NATO creates a general added value that ultimately benefits all members.**

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Moreover, NATO is not an isolated, random collection of members. It remains, at least for the most part, an alliance of free, democratic states with a clear set of values<sup>3</sup> prescribed in the NATO treaty: democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. The alliance is also firmly embedded in the rules-based international order. In the preamble to the Washington Treaty, for instance, members “reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations”<sup>4</sup>; in all, the treaty, which is made up of only 14 articles, makes reference to the United Nations six times.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, multilateral organisations such as NATO are not an end in themselves. They are useful wherever they provide global or regional public goods more effectively than individual states can. This is often determined by the fact that answers to challenges of global proportions can only be effectively formulated through international cooperation. This is especially true of the public goods NATO provides: peace and security. It is virtually impossible for small or mid-sized countries such as Germany to unilaterally provide these goods to the same

extent. It becomes possible only through cooperation with like-minded neighbouring states.<sup>6</sup>

### **Trump’s Rhetorical Estrangement from NATO**

NATO and its mission are, thus, a special symbol for the principles of multilateralism. Its current crisis and the fundamental challenges facing the alliance today are, to a certain extent, also due to doubts about these values. These doubts are being voiced especially loudly by the US president with his confrontational rhetoric.

An example of his scepticism about the importance and value of the alliance are Trump’s comments during the 2016 election campaign and the early years of his presidency. Against the backdrop of his early statements that NATO was “obsolete”, he caused particular concern when, during his first NATO summit in Brussels in 2017, he omitted from his speech the expected reaffirmation of the Article 5 assistance obligation.<sup>7</sup> The omission sowed doubts concerning the fundamental principle of indivisibility mentioned above, which is part of the multilateral DNA of the alliance. It appeared as though the US president no longer wished to recognise that an attack on one NATO member was an attack on all of them, and that the security of the alliance was thus indivisible. Instead, he attempted to separate the security of the US from that of Europe and Canada.

Furthermore, Trump repeatedly complained of the costs incurred by the US in defending NATO allies.<sup>8</sup> For instance, he tweeted in 2017 that “[...] the United States must be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!”<sup>9</sup> Trump has also criticised other member states for the same reason, although the US president focuses especially on Germany due to trade policy issues. Trump thus revealed his transactional understanding of alliances by immediately demanding a quid pro quo, something in exchange. However, this contradicts the fundamental principle of reciprocity outlined above, which is a component of multilateral cooperation.<sup>10</sup>



Joint exercises: An attack on one or more NATO member states is treated as an attack on all of them.

Source: © Stoyan Nenov, Reuters.

Trump has toned down this critical rhetoric during his term in office, not least thanks to efforts on the part of influential advisers. For instance, he retracted his initial statement that NATO was “obsolete” and later affirmed the American willingness to provide support under Article 5. Nevertheless, according to reports from those positioned near him, the US president has by no means abandoned his fundamental scepticism about the alliance but has instead privately reiterated his desire to leave the alliance, since he does not see its purpose and views it as a burden for the US.<sup>11</sup>

### **American Contributions to NATO**

The US president’s doubts about NATO’s added value have so far been reflected more in his

rhetoric than in concrete US policy. This is because, regardless of Trump, there is a broad foreign policy consensus in Washington D. C. that NATO is valuable and that the US should continue its active participation in the alliance. This consensus includes the Departments of Defense and State and the presidential bureaucracy in the White House, especially the Security Council. The most important American strategic documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Strategy, also underscore the value of NATO.<sup>12</sup>

This also explains why US financial and military support for European NATO partner countries have remained constant or even increased after Trump’s election. For instance, over the past five

years, funds for support and defence of European partners have been greatly increased from less than one billion US dollars in 2015 to 5.9 billion US dollars in 2020. US troops deployed and stationed in Europe have been largely held constant (70,200 in 2013, 73,000 in 2018). Bringing 6,400 US troops home from Germany as part of a larger withdrawal plan, announced in June 2020, will be at least partially offset by rotating deployments of US troops to Europe. In addition, the US leads one of the four multinational battle groups on the alliance's eastern flank and actively participates in NATO training exercises.<sup>13</sup> A non-partisan majority in Congress also supports this consensus and is trying to maintain US connections to NATO. For instance, the Senate's NATO Observer Group, which serves as a liaison to the alliance, has been reactivated; the two houses of Congress have also introduced a total of three bills to prevent or impede US withdrawal from NATO.<sup>14</sup>

### **In the medium term, the US government will expect Europe to assume greater responsibility.**

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Nevertheless, the US president plays an important role in shaping American foreign and security policy. His fundamental scepticism about the advantages of international agreements has already led to the (announced) US withdrawal from a variety of security policy agreements, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the INF Treaty, and the Treaty on Open Skies.<sup>15</sup> That the continuing doubts about NATO will, sooner or later, have real consequences remains a risk that must be taken seriously. The President's erratic behaviour makes it even harder to predict when the rhetoric might have irreversible consequences.

Overall, Trump's unwillingness to assume responsibility within NATO and his refusal to accept a leadership role in the alliance are, in any case, not an entirely new phenomena. Trump is the

first US president to ever link a demand for equal distribution of costs to the US promise to provide security to other NATO states. But his statements must be viewed in the context of a partial US abandonment of its role as the unrestricted guarantor of security in Europe, its re-orientation towards the Pacific region, which already began under former President Barack Obama, and its escalating geopolitical competition with China. Despite the fact that US contributions have, to date, remained steady, it is to be expected in the medium term that the US government – be it under Trump or under his Democratic challenger, Joe Biden – will expect its European allies to assume greater responsibility.

The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US the hardest, resulting in both great human costs and severe economic damage, will reinforce this trend. US defence spending is traditionally not much affected by economic fluctuations, given the high value placed in American policy on its capacity to act in matters of defence policy. Nonetheless, the economic effects of the pandemic will put the US budget under further pressure and thus provide additional arguments to shift some of the burden which has so far been borne by the US to its European NATO allies.

### **Strengthening NATO's European Pillar**

Ultimately, for the European member states of NATO, this means that, while it will remain a transatlantic alliance, the European pillar must be strengthened. Several European heads of state and government have certainly recognised this reality. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in 2017 that “the times in which we could completely rely on others [...] are, to a certain extent, over”, she was primarily expressing frustration at Trump's rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, since the 2014 Munich Security Conference, top German politicians have repeatedly emphasised that Germany must act “earlier, more decisively, and more substantially” in international affairs and must assume a greater role in NATO.<sup>17</sup>

French President Emmanuel Macron has also repeatedly argued that Europe must expand its

strategic autonomy. But his unfortunate reference to NATO being “brain dead” in the course of his criticism of inadequate coordination within NATO illustrates the still rather reserved French position on the alliance.<sup>18</sup>

## European allies themselves have strongly diverging positions in the alliance.

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Even though European decision-makers clearly recognise the shift in transatlantic relations, the degree of European military autonomy will remain limited in the foreseeable future. Europe remains highly dependent on the US for a number of conventional military capabilities. This is especially true of the core capability of air combat. The United States is the only member of the alliance to have developed its own modern fifth-generation aircraft (the F-22 and F-35 combat aircraft). It is also true of naval capabilities, such as anti-submarine warfare, and of missile defence.<sup>19</sup>

This applies even more strongly in the area of nuclear deterrence. The US is the only member state able to secure deterrence for the entire area of the alliance through its nuclear weapons. France emphasises the “European dimension” of its nuclear deterrence. However, a French nuclear umbrella expanded to cover all of Europe lacks credibility, since France lacks the diverse nuclear options of the US, and has so far pursued a doctrine of minimal deterrence.<sup>20</sup>

Strengthening NATO’s European pillar is also complicated by the fact that the European allies themselves have strongly diverging positions in the alliance, and some do not even agree on whether greater autonomy is even desirable.

Time to act: Germany and its European partners have benefitted greatly from the peace in Europe NATO has secured and the stability of the past seventy years.

Source: © Johanna Geron, Reuters.

Basic differences in threat perceptions can be observed in the question of whether the alliance should focus more on direct alliance defence or on sending military forces to crisis areas. For instance, Eastern European member states, concerned about Russia, are calling for greater efforts to strengthen alliance defences, while France and Turkey, with their focus on the Middle East and North Africa, are more concerned with crisis management, stabilisation, and combatting terrorism.

These divergent priorities have prompted Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania to seek even closer relations to the US.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU



means that one of the most important NATO members is blazing its own path, that its relationship with the rest of Europe remains unclear, and that it is likely to have an interest in maintaining close relations with the US.

To strengthen the European component of NATO in face of these complications, the links between NATO alliance structures and European institutions should first be pragmatically strengthened without forcing fundamental decisions. Following the maxim that EU initiatives should not be in competition with NATO but instead complement it, capabilities in the area of air transport and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), which both the EU and NATO

need, should be made even more mutually available. NATO also already has excellent administrative and command structures that could, in the interest of avoiding redundant structures, be made accessible to the EU wherever possible.

Such a flexible meshing of NATO and the EU would be an important part of strengthening the European pillar of the alliance. At the same time, such measures would allow member states to decide their contributions in accordance with their own national preferences.<sup>22</sup> The joint areas of cooperation laid down in the 2018 joint declaration by NATO and the EU, such as military mobility and counterterrorism, should be expanded to include those mentioned above.



## More Equitable Burden-Sharing in the Alliance

In order to at least gradually close the gap in European military capability described above, it will be necessary for European member states, especially Germany, to increase their defence spending. These members should invest in strengthening their own military capabilities in order to at least somewhat reduce the de facto dependence on the core competencies of US forces.

At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, the allies agreed in their joint concluding declaration to increase their defence spending within a decade to two per cent of GDP and, in the same period, to raise the spending for important defence projects and for research and development to 20 per cent of their budgets.<sup>23</sup> However, in 2019, only eight NATO allies, besides the US, had achieved the two per cent goal. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Turkey – practically all larger member states with the exception of Poland – missed it. In 2019, 15 allies (not counting the US) were above the 20 per cent budget mark, so at least in this point a slight majority of members already met the requirements of the Wales declaration.<sup>24</sup>

NATO allies must be credited with the fact that they have all increased their nominal defence budgets in the past five years. The total increase of 130 billion US dollars for defence spending between 2014 and 2019 was impressive.<sup>25</sup> Large member states such as Germany have increased their proportion even further because of the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on German GDP: The German percentage is expected to rise from 1.36 per cent in 2019 to 1.58 per cent in 2020.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the agreed-upon goals were not completely achieved. There are many reasons for this. Overall, the political culture in many of the “old” NATO member states in Western Europe has become accustomed to receiving a peace dividend in the form of reduced defence spending since 1990, while at the same time the immediate feeling of threat in these countries has reduced due to NATO’s eastward expansion.

The slow implementation is also due to bureaucratic bottlenecks in military administration, and sluggish procurement processes, in part because of inadequate provision of materials by the European defence industry. Furthermore, in political and expert circles, the purpose of coupling the spending target to GDP, which is subject to economic fluctuations, has been repeatedly called into question.

## Defence spending measures the extent to which member states follow multilateral principles even when it is inconvenient.

However, there is still no alternative to ensure successful implementation, not only because it is an expression of the European pillar of NATO, but because it is a measure of the extent to which Germany and its European allies adhere to multilateral principles even when doing so is inconvenient. Finally, the principle of reciprocity outlined at the beginning of this article demands that rules be complied with not only when compliance brings an immediate advantage, but always, with the assurance that the fulfilment of multilateral obligations will, over time, increase utility for all.

Germany and its European partners have benefited greatly from the peace in Europe NATO has secured and the stability of the past seventy years. NATO created “peace of mind, allowing member states to stop worrying about survival and prosper,” as German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer recently expressed it, pointing out that it was this security guarantee that made the German post-war economic success possible.<sup>27</sup> Given these great advantages, Germany should be willing to assume greater costs. After all, only those who are willing to fulfil alliance obligations can demand that others also fulfil them.

It is certainly foreseeable that the budgetary situation in Germany will become more difficult



given the economic slump resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that efforts to increase defence spending will also face understandable pressure to justify them. But it should be noted that Germany, so far, appears to have weathered the crisis better than many of its European allies – and better than the US. This makes it difficult to explain to allies why Germany cannot fulfil its obligations and therefore transfers the burden to other allies (who have been harder hit by COVID-19).

### **NATO and Effective Multilateralism**

In addition to the difficulties outlined here with respect to coordination and burden-sharing within the alliance, NATO continues to be faced with the task of demonstrating its effectiveness in dealing with external challenges. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, multilateralism is not an end in itself, but must be measured by its effectiveness at solving concrete problems. In the future, NATO will have to find ways of meeting a number of global challenges if it is to retain its relevance as an effective alliance.

### **NATO countries must further expand their actual fast mobilisation and deployment capabilities.**

The biggest challenge is the rise of rival great powers that are entering into strategic competition with Western democratic states and are therefore attempting to weaken or infiltrate the multilateral, liberal world order and its norms. NATO, not least due to pressure from the US, must define its future role with respect to China and formulate a response to Chinese influence in Europe and its immediate vicinity. But until the middle of this decade at least, Russia will remain the alliance's primary focus.

Russia's revisionist policy marked a break in the European peace order with its annexation of

Crimea in 2014. This required NATO to make a strategic turnaround; after years of sending forces to crisis areas (out-of-area deployments), the alliance had to shift its attention to strengthening the alliance's own defences. Performing this task is currently the greatest external challenge NATO faces.

The fundamental difficulty here is that while NATO has significantly increased in territory after five rounds of eastward expansion since 1999, its conventional capabilities have been spread thin, since the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act does not allow for the stationing of substantial combat forces in new member states.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, following significant Russian investment in technical modernisation and development of new capabilities for its armed forces, the alliance's advantage in weapons technology, especially that of the US military, is not as great as it was in the 2000s.

The alliance retains an overall conventional advantage, albeit one which is shrinking. But military experts warn that Russia would have the upper hand in a regional conflict with NATO in North-Eastern Europe. This is primarily due to the concentrated stationing of Russian troops, materials and equipment, and military infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, and Russia's western military district, which are quantitatively superior to NATO troops and material in adjacent countries.

Russia would also enjoy a qualitative advantage because of its pronounced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, that is, the prevention of access by NATO forces to the exposed Baltic states, primarily because of modern Russian air and missile defence systems. In order to compensate for this regional advantage, NATO would have to expand its ability to overcome enemy air defences, as well as its capacity for quick mobilisation of reinforcements.<sup>29</sup>

The first of these capabilities will be addressed with the incremental deliveries of F-35 combat aircraft to European NATO states. This aircraft, with its stealth and electronics capabilities, is



View to the east: Military experts warn that Russia would have the upper hand in a regional conflict with NATO in North-Eastern Europe. Source: © Alexander Demianchuk, Reuters.

believed to be capable of overcoming Russian air defences. The US also plans to relocate some own F-35s to Europe starting in 2021.<sup>30</sup>

Improving the alliance's capabilities for rapid deployment and transfer of formation and large units remains a huge challenge. As early as the

2014 Wales summit, the alliance decided to form a NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) made up of 5,000 troops in highest readiness.<sup>31</sup> Following a US initiative, it also set up the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI) in 2020, which is able to mobilise 30 army battalions, 30 aircraft squadrons, and 30 warships within 30 days.



Despite these steps, NATO countries must further consolidate their actual fast mobilisation and deployment capabilities. For instance, at the beginning of 2020, it was clear that much of the German contingent for the NRI – made up of 7,000 troops, 50 aircraft, and three ships – was neither fully equipped nor ready to deploy.<sup>32</sup> If

an adequate alliance defence is to be ensured, member states' armed forces must also be operatively deployable.

In order to fulfil its mission of containing Russia, NATO must also secure its nuclear deterrence capability. NATO's 2010 strategic concept

explicitly emphasises that it is a “nuclear alliance”.<sup>33</sup> In the intercontinental area, the US nuclear arsenal<sup>34</sup> balances Russia’s thanks to the limits of the New START Treaty, which remains in force until 2021. In the area of medium- and short-range missile systems, however, there is an imbalance in favour of Russia, which has heavily invested in this class of weapons.<sup>35</sup>

That is why a continued, strengthened nuclear deterrence on the part of NATO is necessary.<sup>36</sup> To begin with, Germany and four other European NATO allies<sup>37</sup> should fulfil their nuclear sharing obligation to enhance this nuclear deterrence. Within the framework of nuclear sharing, the US stores 100 to 150 B61-3 and B61-4 gravity bombs in Europe. These bombs can be delivered by allied aircraft – in Germany, this has so far been the Tornado, and in future will likely be the F-18.<sup>38</sup> If war were to break out, the US would approve their use and the countries in which they are stationed would have to agree to deliver them.

The operative utility of nuclear gravity bombs is not without controversy – critics point out that air-launched cruise missiles would more credibly deter Russia because of their greater ability to penetrate air defences. Despite these military considerations, nuclear participation remains an important political expression of solidarity and cooperation within NATO. Withdrawing from such participation, given its unpopularity among the public, has been considered recently in Germany in preparation for the 2021 Bundestag elections. But it would mean ceasing to share nuclear risks and would be seen by Germany’s NATO allies as a weakening of German alliance solidarity.<sup>39</sup> That is why nuclear participation should be continued.

### Challenges on the Horizon

In addition to the central task of securing alliance defence, NATO will face a number of other challenges in the coming years. These include developments in a European neighbourhood marked by conflicts, terrorism, and disintegrating statehood. Another challenge is the foreseeable end

of the most important NATO mission of the last decades, the mission in Afghanistan. In addition to organising an orderly withdrawal, the alliance must also decide the extent to which it will assume responsibility for the stabilisation of the still-volatile country and for the suppression of dangers associated with rising terrorism. In other crisis-ridden countries to Europe’s south, the alliance has come to play a rather subordinate role. NATO members have started engaging in solo efforts: Turkey in Syria, the French-dominated anti-terrorist operations in the Sahel region, in addition to the UN and EU missions there. NATO must therefore develop a better-coordinated strategy for dealing with crises in the Middle East and North Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown that even unconventional, non-military challenges require the alliance’s attention. NATO can bring concrete added value, with such capabilities as logistics and air transport as part of the Strategic Airlift International Solutions (SALIS) programme and NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre for the support of member state relief efforts.<sup>40</sup> It can also provide protection against efforts to destabilise democratic societies by influencing public opinion via disinformation and propaganda, which have intensified during the COVID-19 crisis in the form of fake news about the origin of the virus, and campaigns to undermine European cohesion. NATO has structures such as the counter-hybrid support teams and a hybrid analysis branch that can be used to support member states in their efforts to defend against hybrid threats and to develop resilience.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

NATO is neither “obsolete” nor “brain-dead” – but it does face a number of internal and external challenges. They are not limited to the doubts expressed by the US president with regard to the multilateral principles that still form part of the alliance’s DNA. To maintain its position as an effective multilateral organisation, NATO must also adequately address a number of external problems. NATO’s challenges are therefore, to

a certain extent, an expression of the difficulties currently facing the entire multilateral international order.

At the same time, various problems are due to a fundamental strategic re-orientation on the part of the US, which is likely to intensify in the coming years. This requires NATO to strengthen its European pillar without abandoning its transatlantic connection. In the future, the European component of the alliance will thus have to assume a greater role in the alliance's primary task of providing collective defence. For Germany, in particular, this means that it will have to do more to meet its alliance obligations in terms of defence spending, equipping and providing quick reaction troops for NATO's intervention units, and continuing its nuclear sharing. At the same time, NATO will have to tackle other challenges, such as crisis management and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*–translated from German–*

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