

# NATO and Trump

## The Case for a New Transatlantic Bargain



A NEW DEAL  
FOR **NATO**

By Fabrice Pothier  
and Alexander Vershbow



# NATO and Trump

## The Case for a New Transatlantic Bargain

By Fabrice Pothier  
and Alexander Vershbow



ISBN: 978-1-61977-413-1

*Cover photo:* Staff Sgt. Keith Anderson/Wikimedia. Closing Ceremonies for NATO Exercise Iron Sword in Lithuania on November 13, 2014, involving more than 2,500 troops from nine NATO countries.

*This report is written and published in accordance with the Atlantic Council Policy on Intellectual Independence. The authors are solely responsible for its analysis and recommendations. The Atlantic Council and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.*

May 2017



**CONTENTS**

NATO’s Enduring Relevance ..... 3

The 2 Percent Ticket to Ride ..... 4

European Security Reloaded..... 8

For a More Operational Role in the Middle East .....12

The Art of Continuous Reform .....14

Conclusion .....15



**E**ven before his inauguration, President Donald Trump shook the foundations of NATO more than any of his predecessors. Then candidate Trump's statements about the unfair fiscal burden carried by the United States compared with its European allies were nothing fundamentally new in NATO's nearly seven-decade history. However, his argument that NATO was "obsolete"<sup>1</sup> because it was not doing enough to fight terrorism caused puzzlement in European capitals, given NATO's fifteen-year involvement in Afghanistan. Of even greater concern, however, was his apparent readiness to make conditional the holiest of holies, the US commitment under Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty to come to the defense of any ally that comes under attack. Trump suggested that would depend on whether the ally in question had "fulfilled [its financial] obligations to us,"<sup>2</sup> specifically whether it had met NATO's 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) target for defense spending.

Never had a leading US political figure gone so far as to call into question US treaty obligations to its European allies, and to question the value of NATO itself. Senior administration officials have tempered the president's statement since then—most notably, Vice President Mike Pence during his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2017, when he said that "the United States of America strongly supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment to this trans-Atlantic alliance."<sup>3</sup> Allies and pro-NATO voices in the US Congress have also been reassured by the composition of the president's national security team and initial engagements with their allied counterparts. Finally, Trump went as far as to recently declare NATO no longer obsolete.<sup>4</sup> Although this was positive news for the allies, the ease of the president's U-turn continues to arouse suspicion.

**“The lingering doubts the new president has created...need to be addressed through a concrete renewal of vows between the United States and Europe”**

As Trump prepares for his first NATO Leaders' Meeting in Brussels on May 25, the lingering doubts the new president has created about the US commitment to its oldest military alliance need to be addressed through a concrete renewal of vows between the United States and Europe. Should these doubts persist, there is a danger that the allies could drift apart, with the United States assuming a posture of transactional unilateralism and a preference for coalitions of the willing, and

1 "Trump Worries NATO with 'Obsolete' Comment," BBC News, January 16, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>.

2 David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, "Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies against Attack," *New York Times*, July 20, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html?_r=0).

3 The White House, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference," February 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/18/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>.

4 The White House, "Joint Press Conference of President Trump and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg," April 12, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/12/joint-press-conference-president-trump-and-nato-secretary-general>.





US President Donald Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met in Washington, DC on April 12, 2017 to discuss the importance of allied burden sharing and the future of the transatlantic partnership. *Photo credit: NATO.*

Europe turning inward. This would make the transatlantic community undoubtedly weaker and less able to tackle a complex web of global and regional threats.

When NATO's twenty-eight heads of state and government sit down in Brussels on May 25 for their working dinner, it would be a mistake to focus on burden-sharing alone. Instead, they should work to outline a new bargain between the United States and Europe, in which all allies agree to a stronger mandate for the Alliance to meet security challenges both in Europe and beyond. The United States should reconfirm its role as the guarantor of European security while gaining support for principled engagement with Russia aimed at reducing tensions and bringing Moscow back into the international rules-based order. The European allies and Canada should commit to a concrete plan and a tighter timetable for increasing defense spending by the end of Trump's term, and agree to a substantially enhanced operational role for the Alliance in the wider Middle East as NATO's contribution to the fight against terrorism.

In addition, allies on both sides of the Atlantic should commit to maintaining the momentum of efforts to strengthen NATO's deterrence posture in Europe and to reform NATO's political and military structures. Both structures are in dire need of more flexibility to deal with twenty-first-century threats, including an aggressive, revanchist Russia.



Such a bargain will not be easy to achieve. Trump is a divisive figure for many in Europe. Some of his priorities, from environmental deregulation to a ban on refugees from some Muslim-majority countries, put him on a direct collision course with core European interests and values. Europe, for the first time since the end of World War II, faces a US administration that is skeptical of the value of the European integration project at a time when Europe is feeling vulnerable and unsure of its own direction, and faces complex negotiations about the terms under which the United Kingdom (UK) will leave the European Union (EU), following the 2016 referendum that resulted in a narrow win for the Brexit camp. A potential decision by the Trump administration to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in response to Russia's illegal deployment of an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile is just one of the contentious issues that could complicate efforts to forge a bargain among the allies at the Brussels meeting of NATO leaders.

In spite of these challenges, the reality—counterintuitive as it may sound—is that the Trump administration could be the catalyst for long overdue changes for the Alliance. The question is whether European leaders will be willing and capable of generating the resources and the political will that will be needed to strike a new transatlantic bargain with such a controversial leader as President Trump.

### **NATO'S ENDURING RELEVANCE**

Founded in 1949 to defend Western Europe against the growing power of the Soviet Union, NATO has outlived its former adversary because of its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. While collective defense has always been NATO's number one mission, and NATO's integrated command structure its most precious asset, the Alliance assumed a greater political role in the 1950s and 1960s. A watershed event was the 1967 Harmel Report on the "Future Tasks of the Alliance," which established deterrence and dialogue as the twin pillars of Alliance strategy and laid the foundations for East-West détente.<sup>5</sup>

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact dissolved peacefully, NATO's mission changed even more fundamentally: the Alliance broadened its military role to include crisis management, and helped end two wars in the former Yugoslavia. Politically, through partnerships and openness to admission of new members, NATO drove efforts to build a Europe whole, free, and at peace—an integrated European security system with a place for a democratic Russia. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, NATO's mission enlarged even further to include counterterrorism and counter-insurgency, and NATO's network of partners expanded beyond Europe to the Middle East, North Africa, Persian Gulf, and Asia-Pacific regions.

The year 2014 brought new changes to the security environment, requiring NATO to adapt once again to changing circumstances. With Russia's aggression against Ukraine—its illegal annexation of Crimea and its direct sponsorship of a separatist insurgency in Eastern Ukraine—Moscow again became an adversary, forcing the

<sup>5</sup> See NATO, "The Future Tasks of the Alliance," Report of the Council, December 14, 1967, [http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/official\\_texts\\_26700.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm).

Alliance to restore its defense and deterrence posture, including the deployment of multinational battle groups in the most exposed eastern members of the Alliance. Allies also pledged to increase defense spending, and to boost political and practical support to countries like Ukraine and Georgia that face Russian threats to their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the south, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), with its declaration of a caliphate with state-like features, forced allies to increase their efforts in the fight against terrorism, and to boost programs aimed at “projecting stability” to vulnerable Middle Eastern neighbors through training and defense capacity building. Major decisions in all these areas were taken at the NATO Summits in Wales in September 2014 and in Warsaw in July 2016, and serve as the backdrop for President Trump’s first NATO Leaders’ Meeting on May 25.

## THE 2 PERCENT TICKET TO RIDE

The issue of fair burden-sharing between the United States and its European allies is as old as the Alliance itself. During the Cold War, the US maintained over three hundred thousand troops in Europe and accounted for about 50 percent of total allied defense spending. During this time, successive US administrations voiced their frustration with Western Germany, for example, which was seen as contributing too little to the defense of Europe against Soviet threats. With the end of the Cold War, allies were eager to cash in on the peace dividend, and the US share of total NATO spending rose steadily to 68 percent. To close the widening gap, various defense spending targets were set over the decades including 3 percent of GDP in 1997, which was adjusted downward to 2 percent in 2006.

**“The issue of fair burden-sharing between the United States and its European allies is as old as the Alliance itself.”**

Yet these were always voluntary, aspirational targets aimed at informing the rather esoteric NATO defense planning process. There has never been a binding obligation to meet the 2 percent goal, or any enforcing mechanism to hold allies accountable. Even the idea of publicly naming and shaming those allies falling below the 2 percent target, including such major allies as Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, and Belgium, has been resisted by many member states, although

there is no longer any mystery regarding which countries meet it and which do not. Moreover, many allies question the relevance of the 2 percent target, citing different methodologies in determining what is counted as national defense spending; others like Italy argue that measuring capabilities is more relevant than measuring spending; and a few, including Germany, make the case that non-military contributions to security, such as development aid, should be taken into account.

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014 fundamentally changed the terms of the debate. Originally, the spending commitment was a soft target held in high esteem by defense planners. However, for successive NATO secretary generals and

outgoing US defense secretaries, the spending target became a political expression of allies' commitments to their own defense and to the collective security of the Alliance.

A pledge was hammered out by the outgoing NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen ahead of the Wales Summit in September 2014. The text itself did not contain anything fundamentally new, apart from setting 2 percent as an aspirational goal that all allies pledge to “move towards” by 2024.<sup>6</sup> Germany headed the charge of those most reluctant to sign off on the pledge. It took personal diplomacy by then President Barack Obama and some watered-down diplomatic language to address Berlin's concerns for German Chancellor Angela Merkel to add Germany's signature to the pledge. The Wales Summit achieved a significant breakthrough: for the first time in NATO history all twenty-eight heads of state and government acknowledged the 2 percent goal. From a relatively obscure defense planning target, the goal became a political priority.

The pledge has made a difference. Defense cuts, which had become the norm for almost two consecutive decades, came to a halt in 2015.<sup>7</sup> The club of the 2 percenters increased from three to five (US, UK, Poland, Estonia, Greece), with another half dozen countries set to reach the target before the end of the decade. The majority of allies are increasing their defense budgets. Total spending across the Alliance grew by nearly 4 percent in real terms (about \$10 billion) in 2016. Despite the lack of an enforcement mechanism as part of the Wales Summit pledge, the pledge fostered a sense of accountability at the highest levels of government, even before Trump entered the scene. A telling example is just a few months after hosting the Wales Summit (and after having been one of the staunchest advocates of the defense investment pledge), the UK government showed signs of renegeing on its commitment and slipping just below 2 percent. The Obama administration quickly intervened, reminding London through public and private channels of the UK's commitment. Then UK Prime Minister David Cameron had to override the views of his chancellor to ensure that defense would be exempt from other projected budget cuts.

Russia's foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin, especially his aggression against Ukraine, has been the main factor in Europe's defense awakening. For European allies, Trump's questioning of the Alliance's relevance and his administration's sharp criticism of allies on the issue of fiscal burden-sharing is adding a further sense of urgency. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, in his first meeting with NATO defense ministers in February, warned that the United States could “moderate its commitment” to the Alliance if allies did not get serious about meeting the 2 percent goal.<sup>8</sup> He called for all the laggards, by the time of the Brussels Leaders' Meeting, to come up with detailed plans, including concrete

---

6 NATO, “The Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond,” September 5, 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/eu/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112985.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/eu/natohq/official_texts_112985.htm).

7 See NATO, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2016*, March 13, 2017, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_142149.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_142149.htm).

8 Dan Lamothe and Michael Birnbaum, “Defense Secretary Mattis Issues New Ultimatum to NATO Allies on Defense Spending,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/15/mattis-trumps-defense-secretary-issues-ultimatum-to-nato-allies-on-defense-spending/?utm\\_term=.78256ef47371](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/15/mattis-trumps-defense-secretary-issues-ultimatum-to-nato-allies-on-defense-spending/?utm_term=.78256ef47371).

milestones, for meeting the goal as soon as possible.<sup>9</sup> This message was reiterated by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his first meeting with fellow NATO foreign ministers on March 31. Although national budgets are usually agreed to a year in advance and fiscal years differ from one ally to another, most allies are now scrambling to come up with the requested plans—if not in May, then by the end of 2017.

Trump and his administration are not going to be satisfied with good intentions and encouraging trends and statistics. What is needed to address US concerns and guarantee that European and Canadian defense budgets stay on an upward trajectory is an interim plan—over enough years to spread defense investment, but not so many that concrete decisions can be pushed off to a distant future. At the Brussels Leaders’ Meeting, the allies should work to deliver a NATO 2020 investment plan. This would combine the national investment plans called for by Mattis and Tillerson into a commitment, agreed to formally by all allies, to close at least half the defense spending gap by yearend 2020. NATO should be given greater authority to hold allies accountable to their commitments. Its role should shift from one of a defense accountant—counting spending and available resources—to one of a defense watchdog, flagging gaps and insufficiencies in national defense budgets. This would be similar to what the EU Commission has been doing on EU member states’ public spending levels and debts. Short of an enforcement mechanism, which would be hard to agree to, collective accountability through naming and shaming is the next best thing. As the end year of Trump’s term, 2020 would be the first critical milestone on the way for all allies to meet the 2 percent target by the 2024 deadline.

Many at NATO headquarters will argue that solidifying national investment plans is what the NATO defense planning process is meant to do. The reality is that the defense planning process creates little accountability at the highest political level—namely by heads of government and finance ministers who are critical in determining national budgets.

Politically, this will not be easy, especially for the small set of larger allies who can make the real difference in total non-US defense spending. Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Canada represent close to 25 percent of NATO’s GDP.<sup>10</sup> Yet their spending accounts for only around 10 percent of total Alliance defense expenditure. Putting these countries on a firm pathway toward 2 percent could make the real difference in overall non-US defense spending.

For Germany, the most important swing state given the size of its GDP, reaching 2 percent by 2024 means an increase of almost \$30 billion a year, bringing the total budget to almost \$70 billion.<sup>11</sup> Officials in Berlin frequently argue that this would present a huge absorption capacity challenge for the Ministry of Defense and the

---

9 US Department of Defense, “Press Conference by Secretary Mattis at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium,” February 16, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1085679/press-conference-by-secretary-mattis-at-nato-headquarters-brussels-belgium/>.

10 See NATO, *The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2016*.

11 Konstantin von Hammerstein and Peter Müller, “US Pressures Germany to Increase Defense Spending,” *Der Spiegel*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/pressure-on-germany-to-increase-defense-spending-for-nato-a-1135192.html>.



Standing NATO Maritime Group Two support Greek and Turkish authorities and EU Frontex during 2016 drills in the Aegean Sea. *Photo credit: NATO.*

Bundeswehr, the country's armed forces. This is mostly a technocratic argument that masks the more important reason: hesitation among German decision makers and the general public about the country's changing role within the Alliance and in the world. Reaching 2 percent of GDP would turn Germany into the biggest European military spender in the Alliance, right after the United States and ahead of the United Kingdom. This would clash with the pacifist model that Germany has embraced since after World War II.

The reality, however, is that this model has already evolved into something else. Germany has played a more active role in international security, with its involvement in Kosovo since 1999, Afghanistan since 2002, and more recently in Iraq. Germany has also become one of the key European military providers for NATO's new deterrence posture since 2014, including its lead role in heading the new forward presence battalion in Lithuania.

Reaching 2 percent would accelerate the normalization of Germany's European power status. Although Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party have accepted the 2 percent challenge, CDU's Social Democratic Party coalition partner has not. Whether Merkel or any possible successor will be willing to advocate such an important shift remains to be seen. Other European military players, France first and foremost, might also regard Germany becoming the dominant continental military power with mixed feelings. Yet if Germany is to be true to its commitment and face up to its responsibilities, the country must meet the 2 percent target.



## EUROPEAN SECURITY RELOADED

Putting spending on a stronger growth path should be the first part of a broader NATO agenda. European allies will expect, in return, that the new US administration will renew and even strengthen its commitment to European security, and remove any ambiguity or conditionality when it comes to Article 5.

This starts with confirming the commitments to bolstering defense and deterrence that were undertaken at the 2014 Wales Summit and the 2016 Warsaw Summit. In essence, the United States should assure all the allies, and especially those most threatened by Russia along the eastern flank, that it will play its full part in delivering the enhanced forward presence decided at Warsaw. This means serving as lead nation in the multinational forward-presence battalion in Poland, as well as providing an additional armored brigade combat team of around four thousand troops there on a rotational basis, plus key enablers and equipment to facilitate other allied troop deployments. The additional brigade, part of the European Deterrence Initiative previously known as the European Reassurance Initiative, is to be used on a rotational basis in other eastern-flank countries, both to reassure nervous allies and to add an extra measure of deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>12</sup> In turn, the other lead nations—Germany, Canada, and the UK—will have to do their share, and sustain it over several years. But given the size of the forward presence will remain modest—one battalion each (around one thousand troops) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—this should be sustainable as long as the political will exists.

A further sign of the US commitment would be to place the European Deterrence Initiative funding for the US deployments in the permanent US defense budget. Due to defense budget cuts in the last three years forced by sequestration, the European Deterrence Initiative has been funded by a provisional budget for overseas contingency operations that requires renewal every year. Embedding the funding in the regular defense budget would send an important signal of a more predictable and enduring US commitment to European security post-Crimea.

Reconfirming what has already been agreed to is only the minimum required. Europe still faces significant gaps in its overall defense ranging from exposure to cyber threats, insufficient means to counter Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities in and around Europe that could impede essential reinforcements, and an insufficiently robust maritime presence in the North Atlantic, Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas.

Addressing those gaps is essential to the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense posture and to constraining Russia's ability to interfere with legitimate NATO operations. If not, Russia will continue testing this posture with aggressive maneuvers and exercises. Given the breakdown of trust and lines of communication between Russia and NATO, this is a recipe for accidents and unwanted escalation. Although deploying the required capabilities by NATO will likely be used by Russia

---

<sup>12</sup> The European Reassurance Initiative was initiated under the Obama administration in 2014 in response to the Crimea crisis to boost the US military presence and support to allies along NATO's eastern flank, and especially in the countries most apprehensive about potential Russian aggression.



to claim that the Alliance is the one that is escalating, this is a prerequisite to ultimately engaging Russia from a position of strength that can convince it to return to compliance with the international rules-based order. Looking at Russian military activities in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and northern Atlantic regions, it is clear that, for the time being, Russia sees more benefits in keeping a degree of unpredictability rather than engaging in restoring stability in Europe.

Turning the Alliance's mostly defensive cyber policy into a more proactive cyber defense policy should be a priority in strengthening Europe's collective defense. After much internal debate, NATO leaders at the Warsaw Summit labeled cyber as an operational domain. This gave NATO military planners more leeway to include the cyber dimension when planning operations and drawing up contingency plans. However, it fell short of providing the command and control arrangements necessary for NATO to respond to a cyberattack if and when needed. Such arrangements should not necessarily mean NATO will own its own offensive cyber capabilities. Like most other capabilities, all the way up to nuclear weapons, these will and should remain owned by allies. But it requires developing the necessary arrangements, doctrine, and even declaratory posture so that NATO can respond adequately, and if necessary actively, to a major cyberattack. As things stand, there is a significant gap between those allies who have real cyber capabilities—the United States, UK, and increasingly France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Estonia—and the rest of the Alliance. This gap is amplified by the Alliance's very limited collective cyber defense policy, focused mainly on the protection of its own networks. This presents a vulnerability in the Alliance's capacity to make quick, unified decisions on how to respond to a major cyber crisis. This is exactly the kind of vulnerability Russia is keen on exploiting.

Responding to the Russian buildup of its A2AD capabilities in illegally occupied Crimea and Kaliningrad—including the possible deployment of short-range Iskander ballistic missiles with nuclear weapons capabilities—should be another major priority. Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania, is Russia's only exclave in Europe and hosts a significant part of the Russian Baltic fleet as well as sophisticated air defense and radar systems. Allies will need to do their part to counter the Russian A2AD threat by investing more in air and missile defense, precision strike, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities to deter and, if necessary, counter Russia's activation of its A2AD capabilities. At the same time, despite the renewed emphasis on territorial defense, allies need to maintain and strengthen their expeditionary capabilities so that NATO remains equipped to fight terrorism and manage crises beyond the Alliance's borders.

Allies will also need to commit more assets to the standing NATO maritime groups to ensure that the Alliance is able to maintain freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic. Indeed, rebuilding maritime know-how, including in submarine warfare,

**“Turning the Alliance’s mostly defensive cyber policy into a more proactive cyber defense policy should be a priority in strengthening Europe’s collective defense.”**

around Europe is a crucial piece of strengthening the Alliance's deterrence posture. Assessments of possible crisis scenarios by US and European officials and experts show worrying gaps in both capabilities and expertise in dealing with subversive and potentially aggressive Russian maritime activities in strategic chokepoints like the North Atlantic stretch between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK (GIUK gap).<sup>13</sup> The gap is a key point of access for the Russian strategic fleet to the wider Atlantic Ocean and other seas.

During the Cold War, the United States and other NATO allies used a network of sensors and well-honed plans to monitor and safeguard the GIUK gap. According to experts and military officers, this is no longer the case. Although the Russian navy is outnumbered and considered by most experts as largely outdated, it has the advantage of having to concentrate mostly on one front. The US and allied navies are stretched thin. The United States alone has shifted 60 percent of its fleet to the Asia-Pacific theater and must also assure a robust maritime presence in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the GIUK gap is still strategically important for Moscow and the credibility of its strategic deterrence at sea. For the United States and the European allies, the gap is also significant because of its undersea optical fiber cables used in telecommunications and connecting the United States with European economies. At present, only the United States and a few European allies like France, the UK, and Norway have the platforms to operate in the GIUK gap and detect Russian strategic submarines. But come a crisis with Russia, and given the gaps in high-end maritime skills and capabilities across the Alliance, the GIUK gap could well become NATO's worst nightmare. A well-resourced and operationally tested maritime strategy should therefore be a key tenet of NATO's deterrence posture.

Another partly neglected side of deterrence in Europe—the nuclear dimension—also needs to be revisited. Beyond the ever-divisive question of numbers and locations of US non-strategic nuclear weapons (B61 gravity bombs deployed on allies' dual-capable aircraft), NATO's nuclear posture needs updating. A clear declaratory posture is needed to address the integration of conventional and nuclear options in Russian nuclear strategy. The goal should be to dispel any illusion on Moscow's part that it can use nuclear weapons to stop or de-escalate a conventional conflict. In fact, allies should make clear that any use of nuclear weapons would fundamentally change the nature of the conflict, bringing it to a new level. While not mirroring the Russian continuum from conventional to strategic forces, Alliance nuclear planning and exercising should be better integrated into overall planning efforts. Today, it is still based on post-Cold War thinking, with an almost complete disconnect between what is planned on the conventional side versus on the nuclear side.

All of the above should not close the door to better dialogue with Russia. On the contrary, with a hardening of respective postures, which seems unavoidable for the time being, risk-reduction measures between NATO and Russian forces in and around Europe have become even more important. Russia has largely circumvented the confidence and security-building measures enshrined in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Vienna Document by exploiting the

---

<sup>13</sup> Magnus Nordenman, "Russian Subs Are Reheating a Cold War Chokepoint," *Defense One*, March 4, 2016, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/03/russian-subs-are-reheating-cold-war-chokepoint/126428/>.



Italian forces training their Afghan counterparts in December 2011, as part of NATO's Resolute Support Mission to support and assist the Afghan security forces and institutions. *Photo credit:* ResoluteSupportMedia/Flickr.

loophole allowing no-notice snap inspections of enormous size and by breaking large exercises into several smaller exercises, thereby avoiding the need to invite observers. While Russian forces have not necessarily violated the letter of these agreements—only one or two incursions into national airspace have been reported to date—they have clearly broken with their spirit. The dangerous and provocative flight of a Russian bomber over a US missile frigate in the Baltic Sea in 2016 is a stark reminder of the character of the new dangerous game taking place in Europe.<sup>14</sup> The resumption of strategic flights flying as close to national airspace as possible is another one.

Here, the Trump administration could inject a new energy in engaging Russia, including its military leadership, in agreeing to new measures to improve deconfliction and communication between NATO and Russian forces. Even if NATO's military posture remains the same for the time being, this could help take away some escalatory pressure and risk from the current military activities, first from Russian forces, and by reaction from NATO forces.

---

14 Magnus Nordenman, "Russian Flyby of USS Donald Cook Highlights International Tension in the Baltics," US Naval Institute, April 15, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/04/15/russian-flyby-of-uss-donald-cook-highlights-international-tension-in-the-baltics>.

## FOR A MORE OPERATIONAL ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Trump and his senior officials have openly questioned the extent to which NATO can play a useful role in support of the fight against terrorism, a top foreign policy priority for the administration. The Alliance has so far had a marginal role in the Middle East, a critical region for the United States' anti-terrorism efforts, but NATO should do more and has the capability to do so.

First, the Alliance could play a greater role in training local forces in the Middle East—with military boots on the ground—to help partner countries rebuild their own forces. NATO has favored focusing mostly on advising Ministries of Defense, with some light training on the margin. A model more adapted to needs in crisis spots like Iraq or even Libya would initiate large training missions based on the model of NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan. The lion's share of the training in Iraq, for example, is currently being carried out by members of the coalition on a national basis, rather than through NATO (which has fewer than two dozen trainers in Iraq). This includes those like Canada that withdrew from the main combat operation. However, coordination between the training nations is loose and could be strengthened if consolidated under the Alliance.

The question, as with all training efforts, is their sustainability over a period of years. Indeed, based on past experiences in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East, training local forces needs to be sustained for a decade or longer to deliver results. By sharing the cost and spreading the contributions among allies, including smaller ones who can hardly do training missions on their own, in an integrated way, NATO has proven its capacity to sustain training efforts for more than a decade, including in difficult security environments. This is the case with NATO's Kosovo Force and in Afghanistan with RSM. But for NATO to play such role on a more systematic basis, the Alliance would need more financial and other resources. Contrary to the EU, whose training budget amounts to one billion euros, NATO has very small dedicated funds—the one for Iraq is reported by NATO to amount to 2.6 million dollars, and the existing programs are based on voluntary national contributions by small groups of nations of personnel and money for trust funds to serve a specific purpose. Allies should agree on a common fund of up to one billion dollars: this would help address both the burden-sharing issue raised by the US administration and give NATO more resources to play a more active role in training local forces and fighting terrorism. A more substantial NATO role would also require that NATO structures better adapt to performing robust training missions. At the moment, the Defense Capacity Building Initiative, which was approved by the heads of state and government at the Wales Summit, is mostly implemented by civilian staff. Instead it would need a fully operational training headquarters that can plan training missions and generate the national trainers to execute them, including in difficult security environments. The current NATO Special Forces headquarters, a US-led and funded entity not fully embedded in the NATO command structure, could be turned into a NATO training headquarters funded collectively, like other Alliance headquarters.

Second, NATO could provide more intelligence and surveillance support to allied counterterrorism efforts in Syria, Iraq, and more broadly in the Sahel. NATO is better



equipped than at any time in its history to process, fuse, and provide intelligence and surveillance. NATO operates a broad range of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, including the Boeing E-3 Sentry, an airborne early warning and control aircraft and, as of 2017, from a NATO base in Sicily, the long-awaited Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk, an unmanned surveillance aircraft. At the same time, the Alliance has improved its internal procedures to process and fuse intelligence collected by its platforms and information provided by some of the allies. A new post of assistant secretary general for intelligence and security has been created at the NATO civilian headquarters. However, the quality of the intelligence remains limited to what the main intelligence providers, mostly the United States, are willing to share with NATO. Intelligence briefings can be contentious among allies who do not always share the same views on key security developments. This was exemplified by the frequent tensions in the North Atlantic Council at the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Some allies disputed the existence of the so-called little green men when others were supporting intelligence briefings that attested to the presence of Russian special forces in Crimea.

The real hurdle to a greater NATO role in the Middle East region, however, is not technical or operational. It is above all political, starting with the strong reluctance in Europe, especially in Paris and Berlin. For Berlin, especially the Social Democratic Party, a greater NATO role brings back memories of the controversial Iraq War and always raises the difficult question of Bundeswehr involvement in combat operations. For Paris, the issue is maintaining the special operational relationship developed between French forces and their US counterparts in the Sahel and the Iraq and Syria theaters over the last four years, since the launch of Operation Serval against terrorist groups in northern Mali. French top military commanders are known to want to maintain this hard-earned special relationship; they usually claim that NATO or even the EU would be too constraining and add little to military operations (this is based on discussions between senior NATO officials and French military leadership). Paris has also traditionally been keen to preserve some degree of strategic autonomy for itself and for Europe in its southern neighborhood. Trump's controversial measures in his first months of presidency to ban entry into the United States by citizens of Syria, Libya, and four other Muslim-majority countries will not help him convince reluctant allies.

**“NATO is better equipped than at any time in its history to process, fuse, and provide intelligence and surveillance [to support allied counterterrorism efforts].”**

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, within the Middle East, a region already wary of external interference, a greater role for NATO would not be uncontroversial. Indeed, some European diplomats often claim that NATO has a negative image in the Middle East that argues for keeping a low profile in the region. The reality is that political support for NATO's involvement in the region, while varying from country to country, is much stronger than many European allies admit. For example, NATO's

2011 intervention in Libya to protect civilians facilitated the end of Muammar al-Qaddafi's authoritarian regime and was supported by the majority of Libyans. Gulf partners are always keen to welcome NATO leaders in the region, and Iraq and Jordan have traditionally sought deeper NATO involvement to complement US bilateral security assistance.

In addition to European hesitation, Trump would also have to address skeptics in his own camp, starting with the US military leadership. Throughout the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, US military leaders, especially those based in US Central Command, have been the hardest to convince of the added value that NATO would bring, preferring coalitions of the willing and ad-hoc arrangements.

In fact, NATO could be an ideal platform to bring together allies who are still far apart on how to handle the crisis in Syria, such as Turkey, the United States under Trump, and the Europeans. Trump would have to display both leadership and diplomatic skill to convince the Europeans that NATO should play a more substantial role in the region.

## THE ART OF CONTINUOUS REFORM

Overcoming allied reluctance would depend, in part, on NATO overhauling some of its structures and procedures. The organization has been reforming and transforming on an almost continuous basis since the end of the Cold War. Between 2010 and 2016, there was a substantial reduction in the number of personnel in the NATO command structure, from 13,000 to 8,800, and cuts in personnel in the relatively small civilian headquarters.<sup>15</sup> The organization has operated under the constraint of a zero-nominal-growth budget ceiling since the 2008 economic crisis, with NATO's operating budget cut every year since then. Building the new headquarters was justified given the decaying structure and poor amenities of the current one, built in the 1960s, but it has created a burden both on the staff and the budget.

In parallel, the NATO command structure should be more thoroughly reformed with a greater focus on strategic flexibility to better address both traditional Article 5 contingencies and more hybrid scenarios coming from state and non-state actors. Hybrid threats might indeed be coming from a state actor like Russia while non-state actors can display the firepower and territorial reach of a traditional state, as demonstrated by ISIS. This means the traditional boundaries between territorial defense and crisis management have been blurred to the point where they hardly matter. Yet the NATO command structure still treats the two separately. With limited resources, increases in staffing and establishing new headquarters cannot be the only answers. A new model to better integrate national forces—the NATO force structure—with the NATO command structure is one way forward. The command and control systems should also draw on automated systems that are fast becoming a game changer in war planning. The NATO transformation commander is working on such plans, which the allies should support.

---

15 Nicholas Watt, "NATO Leaders to Agree Far-Reaching Cuts of 30% in Military Command Structure," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/17/nato-leaders-cuts-military-command>.



## CONCLUSION

Compromise has always been how both North American and European allies have found a way to have a stake in each other's security and to benefit from it. Trump has cooled down his rhetoric and even declared that NATO is no longer obsolete. It seems that Trump is beginning to understand the value of keeping allies and alliances. The European allies are slowly adapting to the unconventional style and tone of the new US president.

This is not a warm embrace, with very few exceptions, but it is one out of necessity. That little trust exists between the United States and Europe will be a major obstacle for the allies gathering at the Brussels Summit. This means that the difficult questions, first and foremost how to better contain Russia and restore stability in Europe, will be left to later. Meanwhile, the risk is real of each side going its own way on some of the other big issues like the ongoing civil war in Syria and Iran's regional ambitions. As the split between the United States and its European allies over the Iraq War has shown, this is a recipe for disaster.

The United States and its allies should not repeat the same mistake when it comes to European security and Russia. With the UK set to leave the EU, and the latter in need of fundamental reform, NATO is more relevant than ever to ensuring strategic stability in Europe. This will demand from the transatlantic allies funding, leadership, and the striking of a new transatlantic bargain, even if one with eyes wide open.

**Fabrice Pothier** is nonresident senior fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security.

**Alexander Vershbow** is distinguished fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security



# Atlantic Council Board of Directors

## CHAIRMAN

\*Jon M. Huntsman, Jr.

## CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Brent Scowcroft

## PRESIDENT AND CEO

\*Frederick Kempe

## EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

\*Adrienne Arsht

\*Stephen J. Hadley

## VICE CHAIRS

\*Robert J. Abernethy

\*Richard Edelman

\*C. Boyden Gray

\*George Lund

\*Virginia A. Mulberger

\*W. DeVier Pierson

\*John Studzinski

## TREASURER

\*Brian C. McK. Henderson

## SECRETARY

\*Walter B. Slocombe

## DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

\*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

Bertrand-Marc Allen

John R. Allen

\*Michael Andersson

Michael S. Ansari

Richard L. Armitage

David D. Aufhauser

Elizabeth F. Bagley

\*Rafic A. Bizri

Dennis C. Blair

\*Thomas L. Blair

Philip M. Breedlove

Reuben E. Brigety II

Myron Brilliant

\*Esther Brimmer

R. Nicholas Burns

\*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Sandra Charles

Melanie Chen

George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

David W. Craig

\*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Nelson W. Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

Ankit N. Desai

\*Paula J. Dobriansky

Christopher J. Dodd

Conrado Dornier

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

\*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

Julie Finley

Lawrence P. Fisher, II

\*Alan H. Fleischmann

\*Ronald M. Freeman

Laurie S. Fulton

Courtney Geduldig

\*Robert S. Gelbard

Thomas H. Glocer

Sherri W. Goodman

Mikael Hagström

Ian Hague

Amir A. Handjani

John D. Harris, II

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Annette Heuser

Ed Holland

\*Karl V. Hopkins

Robert D. Hormats

Miroslav Hornak

\*Mary L. Howell

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Reuben Jeffery, III

Joia M. Johnson

\*James L. Jones, Jr.

Lawrence S. Kanarek

Stephen R. Kappes

\*Maria Pica Karp

\*Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

Henry A. Kissinger

Franklin D. Kramer

Richard L. Lawson

\*Jan M. Lodal

\*Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Izzat Majeed

Wendy W. Makins

Zaza Mamulaishvili

Mian M. Mansha

Gerardo Mato

William E. Mayer

T. Allan McArtor

John M. McHugh

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

James N. Miller

Judith A. Miller

\*Alexander V. Mirtchev

Susan Molinari

Michael J. Morell

Richard Morningstar

Georgette Mosbacher

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Sean C. O'Keefe

Ahmet M. Oren

Sally A. Painter

\*Ana I. Palacio

Carlos Pascual

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

Thomas R. Pickering

Daniel B. Poneman

Daniel M. Price

Arnold L. Punaro

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Charles O. Rossotti

Robert O. Rowland

Harry Sachinis

Brent Scowcroft

Rajiv Shah

Stephen Shapiro

Kris Singh

James G. Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

Paula Stern

Robert J. Stevens

Robert L. Stout, Jr.

John S. Tanner

\*Ellen O. Tauscher

Nathan D. Tibbitts

Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Paul Twomey

Melanne Verweir

Enzo Viscusi

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

## HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

Madeleine K. Albright

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

Edward L. Rowny

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

*\*Executive Committee Members*

*List as of May 19, 2017*



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2017 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, [www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)