

After NATO Summit

EUROPE NEEDS A PLAN B



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Our decisions at the Brussels Summit show that, as the world changes, Europe and North America stand together and act together in NATO – declared the Secretary-General of the Alliance. However, US President Donald Trump’s behaviour and actions show otherwise. Not only has he been ambiguous on the US’ commitment towards the alliance’s article 5 of collective defence, he also consistently verbally attacked and undermined his allies. With his inward focused “America First” approach, unilateralism seems to have become the new norm. By unleashing trade wars against traditional allies such as the EU, he has chosen to oppose the liberal world order. At the same time, he is flirting with authoritarian leaders such as Mr. Putin. In these circumstances, Europe needs to get its act together, which includes working on a plan B in case its main security order based on NATO collapses.

NATO's raison d'être

The objective of NATO has been clear through most of its existence. Founded after WW2 as a collective security organisation in 1949, it provided the protective umbrella its members needed. As famously phrased by the alliance's 1st Secretary-General Lord Ismay, it was meant to “*keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.*”¹

As the German threat slowly faded away and the Soviet Union eventually disintegrated in the early 90s, there was an intermezzo of relative safety. However, NATO's importance was again emphasised during the Balkan Wars, just as the fight against terrorism did in the second millennium, which have also led to new security concepts, the last one being adopted in 2010.²

Whereas NATO's security gradually improved through expansion of its membership to the east, which widened the span of the organisation's protective umbrella, Europe's security is increasingly challenged by a changing world order that is becoming more multipolar, with an ever more assertive and nationalist Russia.

Return of the Russian threat

The re-emergence of Russia as NATO's main security threat became clear with the 2007 Russian cyberattacks in Estonia and the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, in which Mr. Putin arguably drew a red line on NATO expansion plans.³ Russian fighter jets also continuously breached many European countries' airspace over time. Recent years have made the Russia-West standoff even more vivid. This includes the proxy war in Syria, in which Russia has sought to gain influence in the Middle-East vice-versa the West.

However, most shocking has been the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014 and subsequent invasion of its Donbas territory, not to mention the interferences in both US and European elections, its spread of fake news and its alleged 2016 attempt to realise a coup d'état in

¹ NATO (n.d.). *Origins – NATO Leaders, Lord Ismay.* [Link](#).

² NATO. (n.d.). *Security Concepts.* [Link](#).

³ Economist. (2008). *Russia and Georgia A scripted war.* [Link](#).

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Montenegro.⁴ Just recently, Russia was accused of attempting to sabotage the deal on Greece-Macedonia's name dispute, which could potentially open the way to NATO and EU membership of Macedonia at some point.⁵

According to some, this shows either Russia's willingness to dominate the European and global security system,⁶ or its drive to preserve the survival of its authoritarian model.⁷ Others think Russia was provoked by NATO and EU expansion,⁸ which encircled Russia. Regardless of whether experts can agree on this, its implications are clear and need to be dealt with. Even more so in an increasingly multipolar world as the West relatively declines and emerging powers, notably China, are on the rise, translating their expanding wealth into hard military power.⁹ At the same time, Europe is slowly coming to senses that the security order that has been protecting it for so long, might not be as sustainable as it seems.

Changing US-EU relations

Since Mr. Trump was elected as President of the US, the country's stance towards Europe's security has taken a drastic turn. The President has gone as far as calling the NATO obsolete.¹⁰ While he took this back later, his unwillingness for unconditional support of the

⁴ Chivvis, C. S. (2017). Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare". *The RAND Corporation*, 2-4.

⁵ The Guardian (2018). *Greece to expel Russian diplomats over alleged Macedonia interference*. [Link](#).

⁶ Studzińska, Z. (2015). How Russia, Step by Step, Wants to Regain an Imperial Role in the Global and European Security System. *Connections*, 14(4), 21-42.

⁷ Bunce, V., & Hozic, A. (2016). Diffusion-proofing and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 24(4), 435-455.

⁸ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93:77.

⁹ The Diplomat (2018). *China's 2018 Military Budget: New Numbers, Old Worries*. [Link](#).

¹⁰ BBC (2017). *Trump worries Nato with 'obsolete' comment*. [Link](#).

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block's unity¹¹ and his statement to withdraw US troops from Germany¹², show an increasing isolationist US, unwilling to remain the world's police man. Arguably, this trend was set in motion earlier under Mr. President Obama,¹³ who in the Libya intervention preferred to "lead from behind".¹⁴

However, Mr. Trump has taken it to a whole different level as people have started questioning the viability of the alliance. The EU's problems do not end there. With Mr. Trump's recent actions to cause a trade war, he showed he is no fan of the liberal world order, especially if they do not align with his narrow vision of "America First". He has sought to undermine and divide the EU: not only has he been keen on promoting a hard Brexit,¹⁵ he even proposed a rather peculiar deal to French President Emmanuel Macron to leave the EU and receive a favorable trade deal in return.¹⁶

While bashing his allies, Mr. Trump flirts with Russia, having suggested to invite it back to the G7. This all has made it a challenge for NATO to demonstrate unity, let alone agree on any new security concept any time under Mr. Trump,¹⁷ who shows no interest in either maintaining NATO or the EU.¹⁸

¹¹ The Guardian (2017). *For once, Trump stays silent about Nato unity – and US allies are disappointed*. [Link](#).

¹² Atlantic Council. (2018). *US Assessing Cost of Keeping Troops in Germany as Trump Battles with Europe*. [Link](#).

¹³ Howorth, J., & Menon, A. (2015). Wake up, Europe! *Global Affairs*, 1(1), 11-20.

¹⁴ Boyle, M. (2011). Obama: 'leading from behind' on Libya. *The Guardian*. [Link](#).

¹⁵ The Guardian (2018). *The Guardian view on Donald Trump in Britain: this was the visit from hell*. [Link](#).

¹⁶ The Guardian (2018). *Quit the EU for better trade deal, Trump reportedly told Macron*. [Link](#).

¹⁷ Atlantic Council (2017). *Don't Expect a New NATO Strategic Concept Any Time Soon*. [Link](#).

¹⁸ Jopin, Rosh (2018). *Trump is trying to destabilize the European Union*. Washington Post. [Link](#).

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The 11-12 July Brussels NATO Summit

Before this year's NATO Summit, Mr. Trump questioned the alliance again, stating it has been used by other NATO countries that are not spending as much as the US, just as it is supposedly being taken advantage of by its allies in trade. Doing so, Mr. Trump linked the trade war he unleashed with the defence spending issue, which he pushed further by stating NATO countries should spend 4% of their GDP on defence.¹⁹ He specifically criticised Germany harshly on its defence spending and supposed unfair trading with the US.²⁰ Mr. Trump's escalating rhetoric prompted European Council President Donald Tusk to state "*With friends like that, who needs enemies?*"²¹

Mr. Trump went as far in openly attacking and criticising Germany publicly, that former US Secretary of State John Kerry mentioned: "*I have never seen a president say anything as strange or as counter-productive as President Trump's harangue against NATO and Germany.*"²² Mr. Trump's hostile and unpredictable behavior, including refusing to unequivocally support the alliance, has resulted in NATO losing trust and its members uncertain whether the US would support them in case of an attack.²³

Mr. Trump stated the US "*would have to look to go its own way*" if defence spending was not increased,²⁴ whereas in an answer to the press after the NATO Summit, he stated he could probably leave the alliance without the support of Congress (although unnecessary, he said),

¹⁹ The Guardian (2018). *Donald Trump tells Nato allies to spend 4% of GDP on defence*. [Link](#).

²⁰ Bloomberg (2018). *Trump Is Itching for a Fight at NATO*. [Link](#).

²¹ Politico (2018). *Ahead of NATO meeting, it's a Donald vs. Donald Twitter war*. [Link](#).

²² Politico (2018). *Trump at NATO: From 'sad' to 'tremendous'*. [Link](#).

²³ Euractiv (2018). *Trans-Europe Express – NATO is dead*. [Link](#).

²⁴ Reuters (2018). *Trump claims NATO victory after ultimatum to go it alone*. [Link](#).

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whereas he suggested again he could impose additional trade barriers on German car imports if Germany did not increase spending.²⁵

All in all, the Summit did not do much good to the West's unity nor to NATO's credibility. Shortly after, Mr. Trump went on to classify the EU its main "foe", while stating the US should engage with Russia, as he went on to meet Mr. Putin.²⁶ While trusting Russia for not having interfered in elections, Mr. Trump put his country's commitment to NATO in question again as he implied in another interview he would not defend Montenegro in case of an attack – which he suggested would mean WW3.²⁷

The EU's exposed weaknesses

In parallel to the shifting world order, changing dynamics inside Europe are exposing the weaknesses of the EU and its member states. While it is still scarred by the Euro crisis and dealing with Brexit, it has been struggling to effectively deal with the migration crisis, whereas populist and Eurosceptic movements are destabilising the Union.

Furthermore, for both historical and geographical factors, it will be Europe that will be exposed to many existing and emerging security challenges, from instability in North-Africa and the Middle-East and long-term trends such as rapid population growth and negative effects of climate change in those regions to the persisting threat of terrorism and Russia's potential direct and hybrid aggression.

²⁵ White House (2018). *Remarks by President Trump at press conference after NATO Summit*. [Link](#).

²⁶ EUobserver (2018). *EU is 'foe', as Trump seeks to make friends with Putin*. [Link](#).

²⁷ Euractiv (2018). *Why die for Montenegro, Trump asks*. [Link](#).

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Problematic for the EU is not just the lack of an integrated military power, as NATO is not such an organisation either. The problem is the sum of its individual parts without the US. In Europe, only France and Brexiting UK have decent military capabilities. Despite Germany's economic size, it is unable to defend itself from a military threat, showing the dangers of the EU managing on its own.²⁸

As mentioned by Smith (2013), the union must realise that to influence its neighbourhood through foreign policy, it needs the backing of serious defence capabilities to be taken seriously.²⁹ The EU must also understand it can become the subject of being shaped by other powers if it fails to act and pick up the glove as the US disengages and NATO loses significance. What would it be able to do when faced by a hybrid or even direct security threat in the Baltics without the US to guarantee their security?³⁰

The way forward

In the current era dominated by the likes of Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin, the EU should grow up and take matters in its own hands, rather than stay dependent. The best option here could be to forget about NATO altogether, which might not be there to stay. Instead, the EU should up its game and develop its own strategic concept with the necessary means to guarantee Europe's security. As Luuk van Middelaar mentioned on Mr. Trump's course towards the EU:

²⁸ Stephens, Bret. 2018. Trump's Dangerous Global Retreat. *The New York Times*. [Link](#).

²⁹ Smith, Michael. 2013. "Beyond the comfort zone: internal crisis and external challenge in the European Union's challenge to rising powers?". In *International Affairs* 89(3): 653-571.

³⁰ Osnos, E. et al. (2018). New Cold War, what lay behind Russia's interference in the 2016 election—and what lies ahead? *The New Yorker*. [Link](#).

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“he is forcing us to think by ourselves”,³¹ including of a Europe without the security umbrella the US has been providing for decades.

This does not mean the EU should consider NATO as obsolete. On the contrary, it will remain reliant on NATO (= the US) for a long time to come. However, to be prepared for anything, it should prepare a new security strategy that takes into consideration the possibility that the US no longer accepts the EU playing a freeriding role and that it will merely play a minimum role in Europe’s security at some point. Rather than staying reliant on the US and NATO, Europe should intensify their defense cooperation.

How should it do so? First, the EU, or more concretely its individual member states, should “foot the bill” as Mr. Trump himself suggested before, and significantly increase their defense budgets to workable levels to keep their military capable and workable. It should not do so because the real estate mogul wants us to, but because it serves our own interests. In this regard, Mr. Trump’s is right in telling countries to spend more, as many spend below 2% of their GDP. Defense, in the very end, is an insurance, to prevent what could fall upon us in a changing, more unpredictable world without US protection.

Secondly, we should increase our defense cooperation. There are already various initiatives in place. One of such is PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) which includes some form of a ‘military Schengen’, backed up by 25 EU member states. The other has been the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), signed up by a coalition of 9 states. The latter links general military staff and realizes shared training and planning exercises.³² Most importantly: it is

³¹ NOS. (2018). *Trump dwingt Europa na te denken over eigen rol en keuzes*. [Link](#).

³² Economist. (2018). *Coalition of the practical Emmanuel Macron leads a new effort on European defence*. [Link](#).

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open to non-EU countries and keeps on-board the much needed UK despite its EU exit.³³ Such concerted efforts should continue, and even more should be done to realize some form of European Defense Union in which countries' militaries are fully integrated, decisions are made jointly and members unequivocally commit to mutual defense in times of need.

Third, we need a clear common strategy on how to effectively deal with Europe's security threats: by Europe alone – alas without NATO and the US. Whereas the 2016 adopted EU Global Strategy speaks of just complementarity,³⁴ a new defense framework based on a more ambitious strategy and open to non-EU countries should aim to be able to stand alone for the simple reason the US could one day further crawl back into its shell of isolationism, leaving NATO – and with-it Europe – vulnerable. Given Mr. Trump's unpredictability and a second term of the man cannot be ruled out, the EU must prepare for this.

Some European allies might take a back seat at first, including traditional US allies such as Poland. This means European coalitions of the willing should continue pushing forward. Given that it were the French who blocked the European Defense Community in 1954,³⁵ there is hope with President Macron's big ambitions for European defense.³⁶ Even the UK has come to its senses that they cannot do without European cooperation.³⁷ Mr. Trump's recent visit to the UK suggest there will be no such thing as a “special relationship”.³⁸ Oth-

³³ The Guardian (2018). *Nine EU states sign off on joint military intervention force*. [Link](#).

³⁴ <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-european-union>

³⁵ Kanter, A. (1970). The European Defense Community in the French National Assembly: A Roll Call Analysis. *Comparative Politics*, 2(2), 203-228.

³⁶ Steenland, Robert (2018). *Emmanuel Macron, A New Hope for Europe?* Centre for International Relations. [Link](#).

³⁷ Euractiv (2018). *Nine European countries to formalise EU defence force plan*. [Link](#).

³⁸ BBC (2018). *Has Trump broken the special relationship?* [Link](#).

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ers will follow, as they will realize it is better to bet on secure security next door compared to unreliable security from the other side of the Atlantic.

In any case, public opinion is in favour for additional cooperation on defence. In the age of rising Euroscepticism, support for more military cooperation remains highly supported across the EU: in its latest Spring 2018 Eurobarometer, 75% of those surveyed remain supportive towards a common security and defence policy among EU member states.³⁹ Therefore, what we need is political will. Forget NATO, we need a plan B – better sooner than later, requiring European leaders to act. Now.

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³⁹ European Commission (2018). Standard Eurobarometer 89 Spring 2018. [Link](#). See annex, question QA16.4, asking ‘‘What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it: A common defense and security policy among EU Member States (%)’’

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