



NATO's State of Play: A View from Prague before the Brussels Summit

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Recommendations

- A cold standoff between NATO and Russia remains the optimal scenario in NATO's strategic direction to East. Strategic patience based on a time-tested dual-track approach is the best tool to reach the goal of a Europe whole and free. An anti-terrorism alliance between the West and Russia is to be avoided since it would almost certainly come at the expense of exactly the same values it is supposed to help defend.

- To the South, NATO and the West need to embark on a long-term strategic engagement based on a complete toolbox, military crisis management included. Watching other actors enforcing their goals via military means damages our credibility. Only through investing the required political, economic and military resources can we hope to create long-term stability and secure our southern neighbourhood.

- In order to get the Allies on the same page, NATO should restart the debate about its Strategic Concept and open the nuclear dossier in order to prevent any harm to NATO's collective defence by a possible Trump-Putin nuclear deal.

- Decision-making procedures remain a hallmark for a consensus-based NATO but proper and realistic political exercises at the ministerial level should be conducted utilizing the newly established position of NATO Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence.

- A new transatlantic bargain is upon us. European defence "tinkering" will not do. Real European capability gaps should be addressed if the strategic interests of both sides of the Atlantic are to be met – an able Europe and content USA continuing to safe-guard Europe's defence.

- For Prague, the right course of action is to assume a bigger piece of responsibility for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. We will not become a possible "battlefield" via our enhanced commitments or more vocal engagements. We – as a member of NATO - already are a battlefield. Rebuilding our capabilities more swiftly and committing more directly to the Eastern Flank would be a necessary stepping-stone in order to close the gap between our geopolitical dependence on NATO's irreplaceable role and our ability and willingness to commit resources.



“THAT IS THE PRICE YOU PAY TO BE RICH, FREE AND ALIVE ALL AT THE SAME TIME.”

LORD JOHN MARBURY (WEST WING SERIES)

NATO Heads of State and Government will gather in Brussels for the 28th summit of the Alliance this year. The new NATO headquarters will symbolically replace the old one used since 1967 when the Alliance had to move from de Gaulle's Paris. More importantly, the Brussels summit will also be a litmus test for the new American president's foreign policy that, even after many bold remarks on the campaign trail, keeps on sending shockwaves through US Allies worldwide.

This paper will use this opportunity and take stock of the developments since 2014 starting from the overall strategic context and ending with a view from the Czech Republic. Prague, above all else seems to fear assuming more responsibility for its fate in the contemporary uncertain international environment¹ – a step that may be crucial to prevent Central Europe from becoming a potential loser in a geopolitical game (played today by Putin against Europe) for the third time in the past 100 years.

‘Big picture’ matters: Strategic patience cannot be a panacea

Much has changed since the beginning of 2014 when NATO's main problem was the Afghan transition from the ISAF mission to the Resolute support mission. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and its continued destabilization of Ukraine have since reinvigorated NATO.

Providing the same level of security for all NATO members has become the Alliance's central rallying call. NATO has addressed the geographical imbalance of its infrastructure, enhanced existing and created new military tools.² European NATO members have also recently reversed the declining defence spending trend thus laying a stepping-stone for a fairer transatlantic bargain between Europe and the USA.

Yet the overall political climate looks rather gloomy for the West (of which NATO is a key political and military pillar) as a regional and global actor given the mounting pile of both internal and external stress tests. Brexit, Donald Trump in the White House, Turkey's internal and external challenges, rising nationalism and populism across Europe – all of that can spell problems for a consensus driven Alliance and can possibly erode much needed Euro-Atlantic cohesion.

This could have the most serious consequences vis-à-vis Russia where a concerted approach on both sides of the Atlantic is absolutely crucial in order to uphold the basic tenets of the European security order that Russia endeavours to unravel. Vacating even more strategic space³ for Putin, who has through the creation of so-called “frozen conflicts” already asserted a quasi sphere of influence around Russia, would be a grave mistake.

The price for an anti-terrorism alliance with Moscow would be certainly paid in particular by Eastern Europeans and would undo the very values it would supposedly protect. While terrorism is and will continue to constitute a threat, terrorists do not have nuclear-capable missiles in range of Warsaw or Berlin. Short-termism would be detrimental to our long-term security. No partnership with Moscow should be entered before Russia demonstrates respect for the European security architecture and the principles upon which it rests.

¹ Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění Sociologický ústav AV ČR. 2016. Postoje Českých Občanů K Obraně ČR - Leden 2016. Praha. <http://bit.ly/2m7YHPY>

² E.g. the NATO Response Force and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF.

³ I.e. abandoning Ukraine or Georgia.



At the moment, the eastern direction can be labelled as a moderate (but reactive) success for NATO. While **stability projection is lacking in both strategic directions, it is more sorely lacked in the south** where the situation is much more diverse (more state and non-state actors) and more complex (stretching across security, economic and developmental domains) hence making it harder to manage. Given the looming failure of the Arab state model and the fragile situation in the Balkans **strategic patience remains the right course of action in the East but it would be a long-term mistake in the South.**

NATO and the West in general need to adapt where necessary but also shape their strategic neighbourhood where required. **Knowing when to apply military force backed by a will to support a lasting political solution that would cement a new desired state of affairs will need to be a part of our foreign policy tool box for the 21st century.** The West needs to rediscover its self-confidence⁴ and recommit to crisis management. The “no-military-solution” mantra is an affront to our credibility while we watch other international actors achieve their goals with military means.

The first step in this direction would be to **start a strategic debate about the validity of the NATO strategic concept** from 2010. The Brussels summit could then more effectively serve as a means to cue in the new American administration. The summit also should not shy away from reopening the nuclear dossier. This issue is again rising in importance not only vis-à-vis nuclear signalling from Moscow but also any possible Trump-Putin nuclear deal and its possible ramifications for collective defence.

In an uncertain security environment „[a]voiding a strategic debate for the sake of avoiding disagreement is not an option for an Alliance which has often been characterized as the institutionalization of transatlantic dispute, yet has survived almost seven decades.”⁵

Collective defence: Strategic patience in the East

Since 2014 eight NATO command and control units (NFIUs - NATO Force Integration Units) have been established in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and Romania. In the latter two countries new divisional headquarters have also been created.⁶ NATO presence in the Baltic countries and Poland is to be cemented by four NATO battalions.

Fundamental change has thus occurred. **The line that existed between old and new NATO member states since their accession to the Alliance has finally been blurred in terms of the Alliance architecture.** All while honouring the NATO-Russia Founding Act (NRFA) of 1997 that the Alliance was not obliged to respect.⁷ This shift is also visible from the number of NATO exercises that after a steep hike in 2015 (from 162 to 270) sank to an estimated 240 for 2016⁸ - they are no longer required as a main means of reassuring eastern Allies.

Reopening a constructive dialog within the NATO-Russia Council framework (while not compromising a principled stand) remains a crucial task for NATO in 2017. But **the Alliance should also be ready to clearly signal**

⁴ Since the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 and half-hearted campaign against *Daesh*.

⁵ Kamp, Karl-Heinz. 2016. “Why Nato Needs A New Strategic Concept”. Online. NATO Defence College. <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=505>

⁶ Multinational Division HQ North-East in Elblag and Multinational Division HQ South-East in Bucharest.

⁷ NATO's pledge was conditional on the non-existence of security threat to Eastern Europe.

⁸ NATO Public Diplomacy Division. 2016. “Key Nato & Allied Exercises: Fact Sheet”. Online. NATO. <http://bit.ly/2lqxBmY>



to Moscow that further worsening of the security environment in the East would have consequences beyond the limits set by the NRFA document.

Building on the steps taken by the ministers of defence in June 2015⁹ Supreme Allied Commander Europe should also be further enabled while maintaining full political control for the member states. Moreover, NATO should **test the decision-making procedures at the ministerial level by organizing a realistic political exercise** utilizing the newly established position of NATO Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence.

Trump: A way to a new transatlantic bargain?

The 2014 NATO Wales Summit recognized that defence spending is a crucial issue for a transatlantic Alliance given the continuous decline in defence spending in Europe in the aftermath of the financial crisis but also more generally after the end of the Cold War. The Heads of State and Government hence adopted an explicit (yet non-binding) pledge on defence investment with a specific timetable for the first time in NATO's history. Two years later the 2016 NATO Warsaw summit declared that the Allies had "turned a corner" because overall NATO defence expenditures had increased for the first time since 2009.¹⁰ The overall strategy formulated in Wales to "aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade"¹¹ remained unchanged.

The Brussels Summit might be a game-changer in this respect should the Trump administration choose to fully capitalize on the opportunity and come through on the President's rhetoric. NATO's famous 2% yardstick measuring defence spending has been overtly fetishized for a long time and even more so during the last American presidential elections. While the American side of the Atlantic overestimates the significance of the 2% metric, the Europeans continue to underestimate its importance in the American foreign policy debate.¹²

The situation is therefore ripe for a new transatlantic bargain in which Europe stops being a "superpower-in-waiting" and actually reaches a strategic autonomy as officially put forward by the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) for the first time.

But could the Trump presidency and the British exit from the EU usher in a historical moment for real restructuralisation of European defence? In the aftermath of Brexit major European powers have voiced calls for an "European army" and work has begun on a European Defence Fund that would finance EU capability projects. It thus seems that we are about to witness a fourth attempt at European defence integration.¹³ As Julian Lindley-French asks, it will be crucial if **this defence "tinkering" actually adds any real defence power. Only then can a new long-lasting transatlantic bargain be struck** with the US.¹⁴

⁹ "Statement By Nato Defence Ministers". Online. NATO.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121133.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹⁰ "Warsaw Summit Communiqué: Issued By The Heads Of State And Government Participating In The Meeting Of The North Atlantic Council In Warsaw 8-9 July 2016". 2016. Online. NATO.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

¹¹ "Wales Summit Declaration: Issued By The Heads Of State And Government Participating In The Meeting Of The North Atlantic Council In Wales". 2014. Online. NATO.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

¹² "The Politics Of 2 Percent: Nato And The Security Vacuum In Europe". Online. Carnegie Europe. <http://ceip.org/2kHyYki>

¹³ The first being the Pleven's European Defence Community in the 1950's, the second the Western European Union (WEU), the third the European Security and Defence Identity within NATO in the 1990's, and the fourth the Common Security and Defence Policy within the EU.

¹⁴ Julian Lindley-French in "Debate: What Are The Real Prospects For Strengthened European Defence?". Online. NATO. <http://bit.ly/2lBZlHo>



A view from Prague afraid to play Hardball

The Czech security policy has been in recent years debased by the Russian war on Ukraine that occurred almost at the same time as the formation of a new center-left government. Prague had since watered down its once principled approach to the issue of NATO enlargement and **chosen to take a cautious approach vis-à-vis Russia letting the EU and NATO do the heavy lifting** while committing limited resources to these international frameworks. The tectonic shifts in the White House, the South and in the East have not translated into redoubled efforts within the Czech NATO, Balkan or Eastern policy.

The Czech NATO policy is a combination of “reliable ally” steps (like contributing to the VJTF, keeping a sizeable contingent in the new NATO Afghan mission or committing Gripen fighter planes to NATO air policing missions) and questionable “Ostpolitik” rhetoric.

The paradox of this posture can be illustrated by Foreign minister Zaorálek’s claim in January 2017 (while reacting to rumours about a possible rebirth of the plans to put a US radar installation in the Czech Republic) that US radar station would make the Czech Republic a target for Russian nuclear missiles. A prime example of wishful thinking – any nuclear escalation between NATO and Russia would certainly not leave out the Czech Republic.

Another problem is that **collective defence is something completely different than crisis management operations**. While Czech military capabilities remain first-class in the CBRN, medical and special forces domain, they are at the moment not geared up for collective defence scenarios. Moreover, the government refuses to speed up the planned defence spending increase (that should reach 1.4% GDP in 2020 and 2% after 2025). The result is that **the capabilities for collective defence sorely needed in Europe today will only be rebuilt by the Czech army around the year 2025**.

The Czech Republic in December 2016 adopted a new armaments and promotion of the defence industry strategy that frames the re-building of a national defence industrial base with the security of supply and strategic utilization of Article 346 (TFEU). It remains to be seen whether this will mean a re-nationalization of the armaments policy (effectively making it a sub-section of employment policy providing the Armed Forces with second-rate equipment) or a way to open the door for integration of the Czech armament industry in global supply chains fostering innovation and strategic dependencies with key Allies like Germany, France or Poland. Either way Prague should not fail to see the forest for the trees – how does this national policy fit into the greater emerging division of labour on the European and transatlantic level.

The Czech Republic seems to be both afraid and unwilling to invest in capabilities and exert initiative above the expected minimum even when our crucial strategic interests are at stake. The Eastern Europe is not Russia’s backyard as some commentators still write about it but it is our backyard. We should act like it. We should have been the ones to lead discussions on NATO presence in the East. **The gap between our geopolitical dependence on NATO’s irreplaceable role in Europe and our ability to commit resources to it needs to be closed**. Making a sizeable commitment to raise our defence spending more rapidly during the Brussels summit should be a first step towards becoming an active player. The (un)stability of Ukraine, the Balkans and the health of NATO call for it.



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