

NATO summit in Brussels: the eastern flank between the USA and Europe

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The NATO summit in Brussels on 11–12 July will be a summit of political and military paradoxes. On the one hand, in the military sphere, decisions concerning the Alliance's further adaptation will be approved during the summit. These decisions, amongst other things, will enhance the readiness of NATO forces and improve the NATO Command Structure, thereby strengthening collective defence. On the other hand, in the political sphere, the disputes between the US and Western Europe over the size of the latter's military expenditures and controversies in political-economic relations between the USA and the EU may manifest the political decomposition of the transatlantic community, to the detriment of the eastern flank's security. This places countries from the eastern NATO flank in a difficult situation: between the USA, which is the guarantor of their security, and the European Union, within which these countries are politically and **economically** integrated but whose strategic autonomy concepts in security and defence are not in line with their interests.

Brussels summit: further strengthening the eastern flank

From the viewpoint of the eastern flank, the NATO summit in July will be of key significance for the further adaptation of NATO's defence and deterrence strategy, even though no landmark decisions will be taken that would be comparable to the arrangements made at the Warsaw summit, where it was decided to rotationally station four NATO battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states. The main topic to be addressed during the Brussels summit will be the reinforcement strategy that will allow more NATO troops to be moved to the eastern flank in case of conflict. This will mean enhancing the readiness of (European) forces and the ability to move troops from the USA and Western Europe to the regional theatre of operations.

The decisions that will be officially approved in Brussels are already known; they were approved during the NATO defence ministers' meeting on 7–8 June 2018. On 11–12 July NATO heads of state and government will formally adopt the Readiness Initiative, in which allies have committed by 2020 to having 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels ready to use within 30 days. In case of conflict in the region, these troops would reinforce the NATO Response Force (NRF) by the time the Allies have met the capability targets according to the NATO Defence Planning Process agreed after 2014. At present, the NRF consists of three multinational brigades (one of around 5000 soldiers as

part of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, VJTF, and two as part of the Initial Follow-On Forces Group, IFFG) reinforced with air, navy and special force components, totalling up to 40,000 soldiers. These forces, depending on the level of readiness, can be deployed in the conflict region within 2 to 7 days (VJTF) and up to 30 and 45 days (two IFFG brigades).

Decisions concerning NATO's command and logistic capabilities will also be approved at the Brussels summit. The NATO Command Structure (NCS) will have two new commands (a total of 1200 officers in addition to the current personnel of 6800 people). The Joint Force Command for the Atlantic, which will be based in Norfolk, Virginia, USA, will be responsible in case of conflict for transporting US troops and equipment by sea from the USA and Canada to Europe. In turn, the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm, Baden-Württemberg in Germany will be in charge of protecting and transporting troops and military equipment within Europe. In addition to the changes to the NATO Command Structure, changes in the NATO Force Structure will be approved at or after the summit. A new Multinational Division North Headquarters will be created in the Baltic states in addition to the Multinational Division North East HQ in Elbląg, Poland. Its new framework nation will be Denmark, in co-operation with Latvia and Estonia. It is also expected that one or two headquarters on army level will be created in the region; Poland has been lobbying for locating one of these in its territory. Furthermore, some member states, especially those from the eastern flank, are raising the issue of improving the decision-making process within NATO by offering more freedom of action to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and enhancing the prerogatives of the NATO Secretary General. The Brussels summit will show whether this proposal will receive support from the other NATO member states.

Trump on Europe

What President Donald Trump sees as the most important issue to be addressed during the Brussels summit is increasing the European responsibility for ensuring transatlantic security; over the past few months Washington has significantly intensified pressure as regards spending more on defence. It insists that the Allies should present plans for increasing their defence spending to the level of 2% of GDP (including at least 20% on investments) by 2024, in accordance with the Defence Investment Pledge made during the Newport NATO summit in 2014. For Trump this is a fundamental question linked to US domestic policy, where slogans concerning 'fairer' US contributions to international organisations and alliances are popular. However, the Obama administration also regularly raised the issue of excessive disproportions in US and European defence funding, pointing out to difficulties in justifying to US citizens the incommensurably high US contribution to European security (in 2017, according to NATO data, the USA allocated 3.57% of GDP to defence, while its European allies allocated on average 1.46% of GDP). In a broadly commented speech in 2011, the then defence secretary Robert Gates highlighted the decreasing patience of the US administration and Congress towards those allies who expect US investments in European security without incurring costs themselves. He warned then that subsequent administrations may find the continuation of this situation unworthy of further US engagement in NATO.

It needs to be emphasised that since 2014, the USA has firmly reacted to the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas. It has significantly intensified its military presence in Europe, including the eastern flank, as part of the European Reassurance Initiative, which was later transformed into the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). It has also increased its spending on this programme from US\$3.4 billion in 2017 to a planned level of US\$6.5 billion in 2019. The EDI's declared goal is to demonstrate to both the European allies and Russia the US's commitment to the Article 5 guarantees of the Washington Treaty. In 2019, the EDI will finance the activity of around 10,000 US soldiers, including on the northern, eastern and south-eastern flanks of the Alliance. Furthermore, pressure from the US was one of the stimuli for the Western European allies to enhance their engagement, first in the reassurance and then in the deterrence measures on NATO's eastern flank. The adoption of the Readiness Initiative is also an effect of US pressure.

In the context of increasing US engagement in Europe, Washington's demands on more defence spending should not be surprising, regardless of the fact how explicitly President Trump expresses his expectations. In June this year, the White House sent letters appealing for an increase in defence budgets to Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Canada. US criticism is directed above all towards Germany, one of the three largest European allies, whose defence spending at present runs at around 1.2% of GDP (€38.5 billion). An additional element of pressure on Berlin was the report (later denied) about analyses conducted by the US Department of Defense concerning the possibility of the complete withdrawal or partial transfer of US troops stationed in Germany. Under pressure from Trump, in June this year both the CDU/CSU and the SPD agreed to assign 1.5% of GDP to defence in 2024, and the Federal Ministry of Finance adjusted its multiannual financial plans. However, the increase in German defence spending from 1.19% of GDP at present to 1.23% in 2022 will most likely still fail to meet US expectations. Unless the European allies take measures to satisfy the Trump administration's demands to a greater degree, a harsher response from the President can be expected during the Brussels summit, including questioning the rationale of maintaining the common American-European military alliance.

Europe on Trump

The (Western) European line of defence in response to US pressure involves highlighting the extended definition of the contribution to common security established in 2017, the so-called '3C' (cash, capabilities, commitments). This means assessing the allies' contribution as part of NATO not only in terms of allocating 2% of GDP on defence but also how effectively a given state spends its funds on developing new military capabilities and involves itself in military missions and operations. Such an approach will not necessarily be appreciated by the White House, which wants tangible financial results as well as future enhancement of the allies' military capabilities, which could be presented at home as a success for the tough line adopted by the President. It also cannot be ruled out that some European allies will adopt a strategy of 'waiting out' the unpopular Trump administration, hoping that the next US president will adopt a more conciliatory approach towards Europe. However, whatever the result of the future elections in the USA, it seems unlikely that the situation existing before 2014 could be revived; from the US viewpoint, the old alliances

need to be adjusted to the changing security environment, as well as Washington's relatively weaker military position.

While burden-sharing in NATO is the main topic for the Trump administration in its contacts with the European allies, the main issue for the (Western) European allies is the broader context of relations between the USA and Europe. They have highlighted the fact that the US administration is replacing its multilateral policy with unilateral decision-making according to rules set by Washington. This concerns such issues as trade (steel and aluminium tariffs) and climate policy, the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, US pressure to discontinue the Nord Stream 2 project, and Trump's hostile rhetoric towards the European Union. From the viewpoint of the largest European allies, Washington's unilateral moves, which disregard European positions and interests or are even contrary to them, are undermining the transatlantic community, and consequently NATO.

The allies on the eastern flank have not been confronted with pressure on defence spending from the White House; most of them have presented plans for increasing defence budgets up to or above the level of 2% of GDP by 2024. However, these countries are being increasingly pushed into a position in between the USA and Europe. Perceiving relations with Washington through the prism of European and regional security, of which the USA is still the main guarantor, the countries on the eastern flank support Trump's demands as regards increasing the funding levels of European armed forces and pressure to stop Nord Stream 2. However, due to EU membership and strong economic links with Germany they take the European side of the dispute concerning trade policy and the Iran nuclear deal. Furthermore, on the one hand, most of the countries on the eastern flank rely on the US administration and, in particular, the US Department of Defense, which, pursuant to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, perceives the revisionist powers, China and Russia, as a strategic and long-term challenge for the USA. On the other hand, the countries on the eastern flank are concerned about President Trump's unpredictability in relations with Russia and the possibility of another US-Russian 'reset' which, in the worst-case scenario, might limit the US military presence in the region. Nevertheless, the chances of US-Russian relations improving are limited, given the structurally contradictory interests of the two sides, the Kremlin's unwillingness to make concessions as regards the key issues, and the consequences of these moves for Trump on the domestic political scene. However, a good atmosphere during the Trump-Putin meeting after the NATO summit, which will most likely be dominated by US-European disputes, may provoke a strong increase in uncertainty about the future of the US's engagement in Europe.

European choices

At the same time, few countries on the eastern flank are enthusiastic about the recent European initiatives in security and defence policy and European discussions about the need to end Europe's dependence on the USA (even taking into account the unpredictability of President Trump). France has ambitions to play the main role in this area and wants to establish European political, military and industrial autonomy. Paris was the promoter of using the Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO) to militarily integrate the countries interested in conducting active crisis management in Europe's southern neighbourhood in

2016. And it was France which put forward the proposal to create the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) in 2017. Even though France's aspirations are not new, in the Trump era Paris's proposals are becoming more attractive and winning (at least rhetorical) applause in Europe. At the same time, the heated temperature of discussion on Europe's emancipation from the USA in security has had only a small impact on the strengthening of European military capabilities.

PESCO will not become an axis for establishing a European strategic autonomy, and will not result in a significant improvement of military capabilities in the EU (even though individual PESCO projects may improve interoperability and coordination between member states). This is an effect of the unwillingness of most EU member states (above all Germany) to support French military ambitions. The situation is similar in the case of Paris's second attempt to integrate the European militaries outside of the EU, the European Intervention Initiative, which President Emmanuel Macron announced in September 2017. E2I initially envisaged establishing a common strategic culture, military doctrine, intervention force and defence budget. Finally in June this year, eight of the states invited by Paris to participate in the project (Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Estonia) agreed only to develop a 'shared strategic culture' through loose co-operation in areas including strategic foresight, scenario development, support to operations, lessons-learned and doctrine. Nor should financial issues be disregarded; if Europe wants to build independence in security and defence policy, it must above all make major investments in the national armed forces, and thus increase the level of their funding significantly above 2% of GDP. Since a large section of the European allies are unwilling to increase their defence budgets as part of NATO, it is an open question how this could be achieved within the EU.

As viewed by most countries on the eastern flank, the Western European concepts of a 'European strategic autonomy' seem to generate more problems than alternative solutions for European and regional security. Firstly, these are focused on crisis management operations in Europe's southern neighbourhood, and completely disregard the challenges and threats which the countries on the eastern flank are facing. Secondly, they are presented in European discussions as an alternative to the alliance with the USA, without taking into account the degree of dependence of regional security on US military capabilities. Furthermore, opinions highlighting the uncertainty and illusoriness of this approach, and the needs to enhance European military capabilities as part of NATO coupled with efforts to reinforce bilateral military relations with Washington, are treated as sabotage of European autonomy concepts. From the perspective of the eastern flank all this means that the gradual decomposition of NATO may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, although in a manner dictated by Europe's choices, rather than those of the US.