



## NATO: Brain dead, or just resting?

by Ian Bond

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**NATO leaders will meet in London on December 3rd and 4th against a background of internal disagreements. But reports of the alliance's death are exaggerated.**

A lot of water has flowed down the Rhine since NATO celebrated its 60th anniversary in April 2009 with a two-day summit, symbolically shared between the cities of Strasbourg in France and Kehl, on the opposite bank of the river in Germany. Ten years on, as NATO leaders prepare to meet in London on December 3rd–4th, the alliance feels a lot more fragile and less confident of its future. But NATO's members still have no better framework in which to work together in the interests of their own security. If leaders want to do something useful in London, they should be honest about their problems, and focus on increasing NATO's role as a place for allies to talk frankly about their security concerns.

In 2009, Barack Obama was on his first official visit to Europe as president, and was immensely popular with Europeans. France announced its full reintegration into NATO's military command structure, reversing President Charles de Gaulle's 1966 decision to leave it. Albania and Croatia officially joined the alliance. NATO leaders issued a 62-paragraph declaration, including everything from tasking officials to draft a new NATO Strategic Concept to offering to enhance dialogue with the African Union. The alliance faced challenges – above all in its operations in Afghanistan – but overall the 60th anniversary summit was the occasion for a show of confidence.

This year, limiting the opportunities for US President Donald Trump to criticise his allies or call into question NATO's existence has become an important objective in planning NATO events. The London meeting was initially described by the Secretary General in May as a summit and a chance to “address current and emerging security challenges and how NATO continues to invest and adapt to ensure it will remain a pillar of stability in the years ahead”. It has become something much more modest, a ‘leaders’ meeting’ consisting of a single working session at which each country's president or prime minister will have three or four minutes (at least in theory) to say what is on their mind. Leaders will also issue a short statement (which everyone involved hopes will be agreed in advance, to avoid presidents and prime ministers arguing over the text), and approve various documents, including NATO's first military strategy since the 1960s.

Despite the damage limitation measures, there is still a significant risk that NATO will be weaker and more divided after the London meeting than before it. What was supposed to be a low-key celebration of the alliance's 70th anniversary is taking place in the context of multiple crises, internal and external, and disagreements among allies.

Trump's decision to pull most US troops out of northern Syria without any consultation with his allies infuriated France's President Emmanuel Macron, leading to his observation in an [interview](#) with *The Economist* that we were experiencing the "brain death of NATO". Macron was equally angry with NATO member Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for his attack on the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who had been fighting alongside American, French, British and other NATO troops against the so-called Islamic State.

Erdoğan in turn is at loggerheads with his allies over their support for the YPG, the main Kurdish militia in the SDF, whom he regards as part of the Kurdish terrorist organisation the PKK, which is active inside Turkey. Relations with the US are also frosty as a result of Erdoğan's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence missile system; the US has responded by kicking Turkey out of the multinational F-35 aircraft programme.

Macron has irritated the US over his support for European "strategic autonomy" in defence and foreign policy – or (as he said in his *Economist* interview) Europe's "military and technological sovereignty". The Americans see French ideas on European defence industrial co-operation as thinly-disguised protectionism, designed to shut US firms out of EU-funded defence projects. Macron's [initiative](#), launched this summer, to "ease and clarify our relations with Russia" has gone down badly in Central Europe and even in Germany, where Norbert Röttgen, a senior member of the governing CDU, [warned](#) against "rewarding Putin even though he hasn't moved an inch on anything." The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has implicitly rejected Macron's views on NATO, [telling](#) German MPs "The preservation of NATO is in our fundamental interest, even more so than during the cold war".

In normal circumstances one would expect the UK, as the host and one of the allies most invested in NATO's survival and success, to be working to smooth things over. But the leaders' meeting is taking place eight days before the UK's general election, and preparations have been overshadowed by the UK domestic political turmoil, and an endless stream of Brexit deadlines and related crises.

Trump disrupted the last NATO summit, in July 2018, demanding more burden-sharing from allies and appearing at one stage to threaten that the US would leave the alliance if he was not satisfied. Though allies are increasing their defence budgets, and Europeans have agreed to pay a bigger share of NATO's administrative and shared military costs, Trump could still give an encore (he has recently shocked South Korea by demanding a five-fold increase in the amount it pays for US forces stationed there, so burden-sharing is clearly on his mind). Facing impeachment hearings in Congress, Trump may think that berating allies – especially Germany – for inadequate defence spending will play well with his supporters and distract attention from his domestic troubles.

Even if NATO can get through the London meeting unscathed, its leaders should not just breathe a sigh of relief and hope that Trump will be out of office by the time of the next summit (expected in 2021). In reality, Trump, Erdoğan and Macron all have some valid criticisms of NATO. The solutions they pursue are likely to do more harm than good to security in Europe; but the correct course is to look for better solutions, not to ignore the problems.

Trump is right to think that Europeans are not spending enough on defence. But there are solid national security reasons for the US to stay engaged in European security regardless of whether all the allies eventually spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence – not least, the risk that if the US deserts Europe, some Europeans may align themselves unhelpfully with America’s rivals, including Russia and China. Beijing and Moscow are using their economic and political influence to try to enlarge the splits between the US and its partners, in Europe and elsewhere; the US should be trying to close the gaps, not widen them.

European defence spending has risen significantly since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, responding to a clearly heightened threat to regional security. The most useful thing the US can do to encourage Europeans to continue to invest in defence is to be candid with its allies about the security threats that all face, creating a basis for discussing the capabilities needed to deal with them.

Such exchanges on threat assessments are likely to be even more important as NATO has to face new challenges – both in terms of countries and non-state actors that might affect allies’ security interests, and in terms of new domains such as space and cyberspace in which threats might arise. Very few allies will have the resources to analyse the security picture for themselves, and to make the right decisions about how to respond.

For the first time, NATO has taken an in-depth look at China. The allies are certainly not ready to label China a potential adversary, or even a strategic competitor. Some allies still see China primarily as an economic opportunity. NATO-China co-operation may be possible in some cases, such as some UN peace-keeping operations. But allies are starting to get to grips with issues that might arise from China’s increasing defence capability, its nuclear weapons programme, its naval deployments (including to European waters) as well as its non-military activities – such as ownership or control of ports such as Piraeus in Greece and Antwerp in Belgium, or involvement in 5G networks. NATO members who have insights into China’s capabilities and intentions can help others to think through the implications of apparently innocuous Chinese economic activity.

Erdoğan is right to think that Turkey’s allies sometimes take it for granted, and that US and allied interventions in Iraq and Syria, on Turkey’s borders, have at best not helped the situations there, and at worst made them significantly worse. But in turning to Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, Erdoğan is making a major strategic mistake: Putin’s interest is in prising Turkey away from NATO and disrupting the alliance, not in providing a substitute security guarantee. Turkey should not mistake short-term friction in its relations with its partners for a long-term shift in its own security interests.

Other allies should also recognise Turkey’s strategic importance. It is easy to be frustrated with Turkish behaviour, such as attacking Kurdish groups in northern Syria, or drilling for gas in Cypriot waters; and right to be worried about human rights in Turkey. But even Erdoğan will not be in power forever, and the West’s interest in Turkey’s stability and political orientation will outlast him. NATO is the one place where Western countries talk to Turkey, not just about it; the allies should make use of the opportunity for plain speaking on both sides.

Macron is right that in theatres such as Syria allies are acting in an unco-ordinated way, pursuing national interests with little regard for the impact that their actions may have on others. He might have been wiser to ask privately rather than publicly what sort of response Turkey would get from its allies if it tried

to invoke NATO's Article 5 defence guarantee after provoking Syria and Russia; but he was not wrong. The answer, however, should be more, not less, consultation between NATO allies.

Macron's approach to European defence and security has been unwelcome not only in Washington but in most European capitals. He would have done better to prepare the ground in private, before expressing himself so forcefully to *The Economist*. He is right to want Europeans to do more for their own security. But he is wrong to imply that the difference between European and US strategic goals is as big as that between European and Chinese aims; he is wrong to think that Putin's Russia is not NATO's [adversary](#), as he said after meeting the NATO Secretary General on November 28th, or that it can be turned into a partner if Europe breaks with the US and relaxes its sanctions regime; and he is misguided if he thinks that in the foreseeable future Europeans can develop the capabilities to defend themselves entirely without US assistance, or outside a NATO framework.

Macron would do better to encourage the new European Commission to take forward work on the 74 'common measures' agreed by the EU and NATO as areas for co-operation – recognising that in dealing with hybrid threats and disruptive technologies both the EU and NATO may have vital contributions to make. And in dealing with Russia, he should remember that since Putin came to power it has invaded two of its neighbours, Georgia and Ukraine, and carried out assassinations on the territory of at least two NATO member-states, Germany and the UK: a lot would have to change before most NATO countries could start to see it as a potential partner.

Despite having 29 members (soon to be 30, when North Macedonia's accession is ratified) on both sides of the Atlantic, NATO has often been neglected as a forum for political consultation. EU member-states have increasingly focused their discussions in the EU; the US has acted unilaterally or preferred to work with small groups. But the security environment for all the allies demands broader, not narrower, consultation, and more co-operation between the EU and NATO, and between allies within NATO. The London leaders' meeting is a risky moment; but it may also be a chance for NATO to show that it is not dead yet.

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