



NATO at 70: Twilight years or a new dawn?

by Sophia Besch and Ian Bond

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As NATO celebrates its 70th anniversary, the most serious threats to its survival are as much internal as external.

NATO's founding Washington Treaty was signed on April 4th 1949 by the representatives of 12 countries. Its first Secretary General, Lord Hastings Ismay, appointed in 1952, famously said that its purpose was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down". Seventy years later, the alliance has grown to include 29 countries. NATO is still keeping the Russians out and the Americans in; but these days it is more worried about how little Germany spends on defence than resurgent German militarism. And it is facing new challenges, internal as well as external: a difficult Turkish regime is undermining the alliance's posture vis-à-vis Russia; allies disagree about which threats NATO should prioritise; the current US administration remains sceptical of the overall value of alliances; and China's growing power and assertiveness pose new risks.

NATO has been an extraordinarily successful alliance. It deterred conflict in Europe until its main adversary, the Soviet Union, collapsed. Rather than dissolving when the Cold War ended, the alliance reinvented itself as a collective security organisation and welcomed in nine former Soviet bloc countries and four Western Balkans states. It went to war in the Balkans to protect Bosnian Muslims against Bosnian Serb and Yugoslav forces in 1994; bombed Yugoslavia and drove its troops out of Kosovo in 1999; and led a coalition of NATO and partner countries fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan from 2001-2011, deploying at its height more than 130,000 troops. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO pivoted back to Europe and its original task of defending its members against a conventional military attack, but also providing various forms of assistance and training to partner countries like Ukraine and Georgia that faced a Russian threat.

For many NATO members, especially in Central and Northern Europe, Russia remains the primary threat to their security. Although Russia's defence budget has been shrinking since 2017, prior to that it had grown every year since 1998 and funded significant military modernisation. Russia has created

[major new units](#) in its Western Military District, facing the Baltic States. It has placed nuclear-capable 'Iskander' missiles in its westernmost region of Kaliningrad, from where they can reach the entrance to the Baltic Sea.

But it is the non-military threat posed by Russia that creates the greatest difficulty for NATO. Russia has shown considerable [skill in information warfare](#), including using fake news to shape Western public opinion, promoting conspiracy theories and political polarisation through state controlled media channels such as RT, hacking unfriendly politicians and political parties and manipulating social media. It has cultivated populist movements in the West, especially those on the right, with a mixture of appeals based on supposedly shared conservative values and financial support to political parties (including in France and Italy). It has used financial ties in the UK and offshore jurisdictions to create lobbies in favour of warmer relations.

For southern member-states of NATO, Russia is low on their list of security priorities. They worry about the migration crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, and the threat of jihadi terrorism. NATO's role in dealing with these issues is limited. NATO nations are involved in the international coalition fighting the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. The alliance could invest more resources and personnel in helping other nations to improve their ability to defend themselves and training security forces in the Middle East and North Africa. But NATO does not have the tools to combat IS terrorism within western countries, or to create conditions in which migrants are less likely to try to enter Europe (unless the alliance were to intervene militarily to stabilise countries like Libya – which seems unlikely).

The more serious threats to NATO's survival, however, are internal rather than external. The first is Turkey. Relations between Turkey and its NATO partners have become increasingly difficult. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan felt that his allies offered at best lukewarm support following the coup attempt against him in 2016. The US and Turkey have had tense relations over Ankara's efforts to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the US-based Islamic cleric whom Erdoğan claims was behind the coup attempt. The EU has effectively frozen Turkey's accession negotiations over human rights and other concerns, damaging Turkey's relationship with European NATO allies. The biggest problem in Turkey's relationship with NATO, however, is Erdoğan's decision to buy the Russian S-400 air defence system in preference to a US system. The US has made clear that it cannot supply Turkey with the American F-35 combat aircraft if Turkey goes ahead with the S-400 purchase: the two can only operate in the same space if the S-400 has access to sensitive data from the F-35, compromising the latter's security in any subsequent NATO confrontation with Russian forces.

The second problem is Germany, the biggest economic power in Europe, but a defence dwarf. The German government last year announced its ambition to increase the defence budget to just 1.5 per cent of GDP by 2024, well below NATO's 2 per cent target. This was bad enough news for NATO. But Berlin's most recent financial plans project a rise to only 1.37 per cent in 2020, followed by a steady decrease to 1.25 per cent in 2023. Defence spending is not the only metric that counts towards alliance solidarity: Germany's leadership of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (a force designed to deploy quickly in a crisis), its participation in the Baltic air-policing mission and in the NATO Battlegroup in Lithuania are important contributions to defending Europe. But internal assessments have repeatedly shown the low readiness of the German military, with a shortage of personnel and spare parts, and long maintenance times. Allies question whether Germany will be able to fulfil its commitments. To reassure partners, Chancellor Angela Merkel recently said that she expects eventual defence spending to be higher than

the numbers announced by the finance ministry, which is currently headed by her coalition partner. But Berlin remains tied up in domestic debates between the governing parties over its defence policy.

Germany's under-investment in defence exacerbates NATO's third internal problem – the US administration's attitude towards the alliance. President Donald Trump has never been a NATO fan. Like many others in the US, he considers his European allies to be free-loaders who do not pay their fair share of the costs of their defence. What sets Trump apart is that he does not see the value of alliances as such, military or otherwise. He has [reportedly](#) toyed with the idea of making allies pay the cost of US forces stationed on their territory, plus 50 per cent, and [allegedly suggested](#) in 2018 that the US should withdraw from NATO.

Beyond the Trump presidency, many in Washington are beginning to look at the transatlantic relationship through the China lens. Since Bill Clinton's presidency, America has been increasingly pre-occupied with the challenge of China's rise as an economic, political and military rival. Some in the US would like Europe to look after itself, invest in its territorial defence capabilities, perhaps take on more responsibility for security in the Middle East and North Africa, and allow America to focus on the Asia-Pacific region; others think it is time for the Europeans to also help the US provide security in regions like South-East Asia and the South China Sea, which are economically more important to Europe than to the US. According to [research](#) by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 5.7 per cent of US, 9 per cent of German and 11.8 per cent of UK trade in goods passes through the South China Sea. US worries about Chinese cyber espionage could have implications for NATO: in Budapest in February US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that it would be more difficult for Washington to "[partner alongside](#)" European allies that procured telecommunications equipment from China's Huawei, for fear that it would enable China to access sensitive US information.

If NATO is to respond effectively to the new challenges, Europeans will have to do more and Americans will have to do things differently. Europeans are waking up to the security risks of growing Chinese influence in Europe, but are still framing competition with China in economic more than in security terms. While most European allies have little to offer in terms of a military contribution alongside the Americans in the South China Sea, both sides could benefit from more detailed exchanges over how to deal with China, and NATO might be a useful forum for discussion. The alliance could also improve allies' ability to deal with the Chinese cyber threat, as Sophia Besch has [suggested](#), including by improving its co-operation with the EU through more joint cyber exercises. There is also scope for EU-US co-operation in areas such as technical assistance and political support for ASEAN countries disputing Beijing's South China Sea claims.

American scepticism over the EU's defence ambitions – concern over the union's declared objective of '[strategic autonomy](#)', and irritation over member-states buying European rather than US-made defence kit – could further complicate NATO-EU relations. In order to strengthen ties between the EU and NATO, officials in Brussels and Washington also need to invest in improving understanding between the US and the EU. The EU and NATO are already working together on countering future 'hybrid' challenges such as disinformation campaigns from Russia, for example through the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which was established in Helsinki in 2017. But co-operation is inhibited by their inability to share classified material in a crisis.

Americans should welcome the EU's ability to add value to defence industrial initiatives, and not let economic competition with Europeans spill over into NATO. The US is unhappy at Germany's decision to procure a European-made jet to replace its Tornado fleet, rather than the US-made F-35 Joint Strike Fighter; but as the French Minister of Defence Florence Parly put it in a [speech](#) in Washington in March, "NATO's solidarity clause is called Article 5, not article F-35."

European politicians should push back against anti-Americanism in Europe, and advocate for more defence spending. Being able to show that defence budgets are spent on European companies should help their case domestically. At the same time, European allies need to show the US audience that they have stopped cuts to defence budgets; that most have put forward credible plans to hit the 2 per cent target in a decade; and that some of the money is being spent on capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, or strategic airlift, for which Europeans are currently almost entirely dependent on the US. But both sides should also look at burden-sharing in a broader perspective. European security benefits not only from more defence spending (including on infrastructure to support US reinforcements in a crisis), but from the EU and member-states spending on development aid, conflict prevention, tackling migration and improving cyber security.

Europeans, despite their difficult relationship with Turkey, may also have a role to play in ensuring that Turkey does not drift completely out of the Western orbit, by maintaining dialogue with Ankara and by trying to ensure that a cycle of mutual recrimination between Turkey and the US does not make the S-400 breach irreparable. Erdoğan's economic problems, which led to losses for his AK party in municipal elections on March 31st, offer the Europeans some leverage.

If NATO is to survive the coming decades it has to find ways to respond and adapt to the ongoing shifts in threats and in the transatlantic relationship. On the occasion of NATO's 70th anniversary, both Americans and Europeans should think creatively about how to keep the alliance spry in its old age.

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