**NATO@70 – How can the alliance continue to contribute to peace and freedom in the future?

by**

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**Introduction**

Although its demise had been predicted with impressive regularity, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is one of the great success stories of the free world. Our alliance defied all predictions of doom and has endured and grown, in the process becoming one of the longest-lasting alliances of the past five-hundred years[[1]](#endnote-2). The commitment to freedom, underpinned by democratic principles, the rule of law and the prosperity of market economies, makes our alliance a unique community of values. In a world full of change and uncertainty, this community remains as important and relevant as it had ever been. We as allies have already achieved much together, but in the new world of the 21st century, past achievements cannot be a guarantee of future success.[[2]](#endnote-3) Pressures on our alliance abound, from within and without. This contribution seeks to present an overview of the challenges we face and sets out several proposals for ensuring that NATO can continue to contribute to peace and freedom in the future.

**Where do we stand?**

NATO is confronted with a world where power is rapidly shifting in favour of other states. Russia has bolstered its military capabilities and, as we have witnessed, is not afraid to use it. China’s ambition appears almost limitless as it spreads its economic and political influence to all corners of the world. The instability and conflicts of the Arab world have been directly felt in Europe. The mission in Afghanistan, against ISIS and other campaigns have shown the difficulties of defeating global terrorism. Climate change looms and threatens not just our own, but the security of the entire world. Within our ranks, we have a U.S. President who has called NATO’s fundamental tenets into question. There are also concerns about the internal developments of some members’ democratic processes and their commitments to crucial freedoms. Major divergences in strategic priorities and capabilities between allies continue to plague the organisation. Furthermore, some allies are openly taking procurement decisions fundamentally at odds with alliance posture. Considering all these issues, one could reasonably argue that the organisation is in crisis. But it can equally be argued that crisis is NATO’s middle-name and it is every bit capable of successfully confronting the tasks before it. There are five essential steps our alliance must take in order to ensure that this happens.

**I.**

**Respond to humanitarian and environmental challenges**

The scope for NATO-supported humanitarian missions will need to increase. No country or region can be secure and at peace if its people do not have access to the necessities of life and are threatened by their own governments. These are the types of missions through which NATO can prove that is not only ready to fight conflicts but also to create peace. So far, our alliance has made its most prolific humanitarian interventions in Kosovo and Libya. There are important lessons to be learned from these cases about the complexity of such campaigns, which have already been recognised[[3]](#endnote-4). In the future, our alliance must demonstrate that it has indeed learned the lessons of the past and can deliver long-term stability to affected regions. Increased cooperation with regional actors needs to be stepped up as this measure can go a long way towards building diplomatic bridges and trust. In addition, there is wide agreement about the potential security implications of climate change[[4]](#endnote-5) and it is not a problem we will be able to avoid.[[5]](#endnote-6) Proxy conflicts over resources are already being waged on the African continent, with crucial implications for the European continent[[6]](#endnote-7) and weak state capacities are affecting the ability of governments to respond.[[7]](#endnote-8) The melting of Arctic ice is already leading to competition for resources and opening up a potential new theatre of conflict, for which NATO will need to prepare.

**II.**

**Remember our values and practice self-critique**

President Donald Trump has been accused of surrendering American leadership and questioning U.S. commitment to allies.[[8]](#endnote-9) It is right to say that he has not minced his words when talking about NATO. However, when considering today’s disagreements and disputes, it is important to keep history in mind. Heavy criticism of NATO by U.S. Presidents and American politicians has a very long tradition[[9]](#endnote-10). The fact that the U.S. has nonetheless consistently committed itself to NATO is a testament to the strength of the bond between our continents, which will not stand or fall during a single presidency. Indeed, many member states must take a hard-look at their place in the burden-sharing equation. The much debated two-percent target on defence spending cannot remain a mere symbol and allies cannot shy away from their commitments to the alliance, as some seemingly do, for which they are rightly criticised.[[10]](#endnote-11) It is also right that troop and tank numbers alone cannot be the measure of security effectiveness, as Germany argues for instance[[11]](#endnote-12), but these are nonetheless essential aspects of overall military readiness. There is an urgent necessity for allies to be more honest with each other and to see their place in the alliance in the broad security context. Our alliance cannot endure merely with reference to domestic politics. We also cannot allow our common values to be sacrificed for the sake of short-term political expediency. This means member governments will sometimes have to make tough choices which are vital to ensure our alliance remains ready to confront threats.

**III.**

**Embrace and develop hard power**

There is talk of Thucydides making a comeback in terms of our understanding of conflict dynamics between great powers.[[12]](#endnote-13) Indeed, he has something to teach us, but something that is often overlooked from his accounts of the Peloponnesian War. As the Athenians are besieging Melos, the Melians appeal to universal principles of justice as justification for their cause of neutrality, to which the Athenians simply reply; “you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power…”[[13]](#endnote-14) This passage has a simple meaning, which is that peace cannot be secured by weakness, since weakness can only lead to submission. Applied to our alliance today, Thucydides’ account serves as a reminder that only a strong, well-equipped and united community of peoples will be able to confront the challenges of this century and the threats to our freedoms. Here, we run into a difficulty. There is a fundamental unwillingness among the citizenries of many allies to fight for their countries, as shown by a WIN/Gallup Poll from 2015[[14]](#endnote-15) while NATO is plagued by gaps in defence capabilities.[[15]](#endnote-16) It is essential that member-states take measures to encourage their populations to serve and take steps to ensure their armed forces are equipped, numerous enough and trained for all possibilities. As one distinguished British historian points out, one of the most essential elements in the success of the Roman Republic was the number of troops it could muster – which meant the Romans might lose a battle, but never a war.[[16]](#endnote-17) Numbers matter.

**IV.**

**Establish strategies to combat methods of hybrid warfare**

Since a state’s resources are always limited, sowing internal discord is a less resource-intensive means of undermining one’s opponents. Today, the Russian Federation is making effective use of this strategy to damage trust in our democracies and influence our elections. NATO is thus confronted with the question of how our open societies will be capable of countering information flows aimed at misinforming citizens and delegitimising governments with propaganda, fake news and conspiracy theories. It has already been acknowledged that the main implication of these methods of “hybrid warfare” is the need to design a defence posture and doctrine that enables allied governments to “compete in the grey zone” with regards to capabilities and legal frameworks.[[17]](#endnote-18)Members should begin developing such a doctrine with haste. It must be remembered that we can use our information infrastructures to strengthen NATO too. Social media campaigns, such the hashtag *#wearenato* initiated this year go a long way towards engaging with the public, which is crucial for legitimising the organisation. At the most recent meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Ambassador Ružička of Slovakia highlighted the importance of the campaign for raising awareness of NATO’S role for Slovakia and for generating consensus on foreign policy issues.[[18]](#endnote-19) At the same time, contradicting dangerous narratives being spread by our enemies and those who support them within our ranks is of vital importance. If these efforts are to be successful, they need to be targeted. That’s why NATO should not shy away from enlisting the help of the private sector too if necessary, especially that of large digital companies with an immense reach, as part of a comprehensive strategy towards countering misinformation and hybrid tools of conflict.

**V.**

**Think beyond the North Atlantic space**

It is already recognised that China is emerging as a key challenge for the alliance. The PRC is actively seeking to undermine the international rules-based order, compete with the U.S. in the development of military technologies and expand its political and economic influence into Europe[[19]](#endnote-20)*.* The preservation of liberal democracy beyond NATO’s borders concerns all, because if our values can suffer in what may only appear as distant regions of the world, it won’t be long before they begin to suffer at home. Indeed, this fact is recognised by one of our former Secretaries-General, Fogh-Rasmussen, who has very recently argued in the British press for an assertive Europe that is willing to defend Taiwan from potential aggression by the PRC[[20]](#endnote-21). Threats are also emanating from rogue states such as North Korea, as well as the already mentioned increasing competition around access to the Arctic[[21]](#endnote-22). These issues need to assume a greater prominence in the vision of our alliance. In broader terms, these considerations confront the alliance with a more fundamental question about how far members would be willing to go for each other. Would they be prepared to rally to each other’s assistance in distant conflicts? Afghanistan showed that they are willing, but will this determination persist in the future? Would the U.S. assist Europe in resolving problems in North Africa and the Middle East? The answer to that in the past has been yes, but would Europe come to the aid of the United States in case of a conflict in the Pacific? The answer to these questions must be an emphatic “yes”. Otherwise, our alliance will suffer in credibility and purpose. United we will stand. Divided, we will fall.

**Conclusion**

As inter-governmental organisation, NATO’s ability to contribute to peace and freedom in the future will depend on the will of its members and, by extension, that of its citizens. The path won’t be simple to tread but given our history, there every reason to be confident that the will to work together among allies will not falter. As shown in this contribution, our challenges are omnipresent. Therefore, we must think of NATO’s mission of peace and freedom not as a purely transatlantic project, but a quintessentially global one. There is also much work to be done in promoting acceptance of a strong NATO and encouraging citizens to become engaged in security matters. Faced with limited resources, priorities will have to be set. These will in the long run demand more resources than are currently being deployed. The proposals outlined, though by no means exhaustive will make an essential contribution to our alliance’s ability to contribute to peace and freedom in the coming decades. As a final note, it is worth mentioning there are growing voices calling for a “European Army” and “Strategic Autonomy” for Europe from the United States. If history teaches anything, it is that peace and freedom can only be secured by working together. That is why Secretary-General Stoltenberg was right to point out, above all in Berlin, that European unity can never replace transatlantic unity.[[22]](#endnote-23)

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