

NATO's 70th Birthday: Family Matters at Stake

by Andrea Aversano Stabile

ABSTRACT

In an ever complex international security environment, NATO is called to guarantee the security of its members against an unprecedented number of threats. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the spectrum of menaces has been broadened, thus preventing the expiration of the Alliance's mandate. However, the lack of a commonly acknowledged enemy has indirectly led to fragmentation within NATO, as member states have gradually prioritised their national agendas over broader commitments within the Alliance. This has resulted in divergences on several dossiers, including the same perception of threats to be countered. Apart from the absence of a recognised adversary, frictions may also be explained by the lack of an internal mechanism allowing for politico-strategic discussions on wide-ranging matters. The establishment of sectorial and thematic working groups may correct this bias, thereby paving the way for improvements in terms of internal cohesion. However, these ad hoc configurations, gathering a number of Allies particularly affected by a given topic, should not be intended neither as substitutes of formal committees, nor as pioneers for the regionalisation of NATO. Rather, their institutionalisation would help raising awareness on certain issues, as well as guiding the decision-making process through opinions or recommendations.

NATO | US military policy | Europe | Transatlantic relations | Multilateralism

keywords

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by Andrea Aversano Stabile*

The 2019 NATO's celebration of 70 years from the signature of the Washington Treaty has been a very impressive milestone for military alliances, as they are generally doomed to last for a more limited timeframe. This notwithstanding, doubts are arising among experts on NATO's effective potential and usefulness at present stage and within the next decades.¹ Against a backdrop where extremely varied and unpredictable external threats are becoming more and more difficult to tackle, NATO needs to keep up with the times by facing its peculiar internal dynamics beforehand.

The Washington Treaty established NATO in 1949 to guarantee collective defence of the Euro-Atlantic region against the Soviet enemy on the eve of the Cold War. Once accomplished the main objective with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO had to reinvent itself, starting to broaden its competences to continue serving member states' security interests while not becoming "out of business".²

Over the last three decades, NATO has been able to adapt to the evolving international security environment, going beyond the pure notion of collective defence. Three Strategic Concepts have successively refined NATO's priorities and introduced new commitments, according to an "evolutionary" rather than "revolutionary" pathway.³ After the first two paradigms published in 1991 and in 1999, respectively in the aftermath of the Cold War and of allied operations in Kosovo, the last 2010 Strategic Concept deals in a balanced way with collective

¹ Julie Thompson, "NATO Revamped: Why the Alliance Needs to Change", in *The National Interest*, 26 February 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/node/12934>.

² Stewart Patrick, "Out of Area, Out of Business?", in *The National Interest*, 25 March 2009, <https://nationalinterest.org/node/20760>.

³ Martynas Zapolskis, "1999 and 2010 NATO Strategic Concepts: A Comparative Analysis", in *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2012), p. 35, <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10243-012-0012-5>.

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· Paper prepared for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), June 2019.

defence, crisis management operations and cooperative security – the former focused on partnership.⁴ Regrettably, nowadays these basics are not sufficient anymore to frame an overarching posture enabling NATO to stand as a cohesive Alliance.

In more details, the expiration of a commonly acknowledged adversary has acted as a turning point leading to a progressive weakening of shared values and common objectives, resulting in the selfish inclination of member states to pursue their simple national interests. A proof of such tendency is the current, broader crisis of multilateralism and international organisations, with growing political rivalries among Allies likely to further exacerbate divergences also within NATO.⁵ The general sentiment in several Western countries rejecting multilateral linkages is contributing to creating a confusing picture concerning common security understandings of the Alliance,⁶ as tailored and sensitive collaborations have occasionally gone towards NATO borders up to involving hostile actors.

In addition, in light of more and more blurred lines between times of war and peace,⁷ uncontrolled ties with potential enemies not bound by common solidarity clauses with NATO may jeopardise the defensive apparatus of the Alliance, thereby acting as a Trojan horse in the event of intrusive attacks. Indeed, destabilising plans orchestrated by enemies encounter breeding ground in these centrifugal actions, and risk to produce a magnet effect by persuading member states even to abandon established commitments within the Alliance and act as an additional internal burden for the whole organisation.

On top of that, NATO evidently lacks a shared mechanism of threat perception, as Member states tend to prioritise their respective more sensitive concerns with reference to their geographical and/or political situation.⁸ A detailed assessment of domestic determinants of foreign policy within NATO would simplify the acknowledgment of a set of threats to be countered, whose definition is however highly problematic due to their constant evolution in the global security environment. In such a situation, NATO is called to internally define its external

⁴ Alessandro Marrone, "The Equilibrium of the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (September 2011), p. 93-111.

⁵ Mark Copelovitch and Jon C. W. Pevehouse, "International Organizations in a New Era of Populist Nationalism", in *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June 2019), p. 169-186.

⁶ Aaron Bazin and Dominika Kunertova, "An Alliance Divided? Five Factors That Could Fracture NATO", in *Military Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January-February 2018), p. 80-89, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2018/An-Alliance-Divided-Five-Factors-That-Could-Fracture-NATO>.

⁷ Alexander K.A. Greenawalt, "If War Is Everywhere, Then Must the Law Be Nowhere?", in *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 2018), p. 25-30, <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/1095>.

⁸ Petr Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, "Victim of Its Own Success: How NATO's Difficulties are Caused by the Absence of a Unifying Existential Threat", in *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2018), p. 38-58.

ambition,⁹ reconciling domestic frictions among its members – particularly US and Turkey – on a certain number of issues.

Indeed, a thorny question mark is the reliability of the US Administration, as President Donald Trump has allegedly threatened the Allies to withdraw from the organisation if they do not decisively increase funds allocated to defence.¹⁰ Under the guise of burden sharing, a real issue for US policy-makers and public where progresses actually have been made within the last few years,¹¹ Trump seeks to conceal his growing scepticism for multinational fora. This trend is clearly demonstrated by the US decision to leave the Iranian nuclear deal, and withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.¹² It goes without saying that in the remote hypothesis of Washington's abandoning NATO, its international significance without the US, whose military capabilities at disposal of the Alliance equals to nearly 70 per cent of the total allied military power,¹³ would be dramatically reduced.

Such a wake-up call by the Trump administration takes place while doubts arise over the transatlantic solidarity of some members of the Alliance, particularly Turkey. Apart from concerns related to the shift towards authoritarianism recently undertaken by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,¹⁴ the position of Ankara is tricky since it has established networks with competitors of the Alliance. The most contested news under the spotlight is Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system. At first glance, it seems weird that a member of the F-35 procurement programme decides to introduce missiles specifically conceived to shoot down fighter aircraft of this type.¹⁵ At the same time, closeness to Russia may be read as Erdogan's skilful move to retain some room of manoeuvre within NATO, increasing the strategic leverage already owned for both Turkey's geographical position and its contribution to operations.¹⁶

⁹ Thierry Tardy, "European Defence: What Impact for NATO", in *NDC Policy Briefs*, No. 5 (December 2018), <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1237>.

¹⁰ Veronica Stracqualursi and Jim Acosta, "New York Times: Trump Raised Withdrawing the US from NATO Several Times in 2018", in *CNN Politics*, 16 January 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/15/politics/trump-nato-us-withdraw/index.html>.

¹¹ "Trump: NATO Countries Burden-Sharing Improving, But More Needed", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 April 2019, <https://aje.io/qx44f>.

¹² Mark Lyall Grant, "Is President Trump Playing with Fire in His Attack on Multilateralism?", in *Forbes*, 19 February 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marklyallgrant/2019/02/19/is-president-trump-playing-with-fire-in-his-attack-on-multilateralism>.

¹³ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2011-2018)*, 10 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_156770.htm.

¹⁴ Soner Çağaptay, "The New Sultan. Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2018), p. 1-15.

¹⁵ Andrea Aversano Stabile and Livia Botti, "The Global Context", in Alessandro Marrone and Michele Nones (eds), "Europe and the Future Combat Air System", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 19|02 (March 2019), p. 26, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10115>.

¹⁶ Kemal Kirişçi and Ilke Toygür, "As Turkish Democracy Declines, What's the Role for Fellow NATO Members?", in *Order from Chaos*, 23 July 2018, <https://brook.gs/2A4fL4f>.

As a NATO member, Ankara should guarantee the interoperability of its platforms and systems with those of the Allies, thereby causing a security problem when the technology of some of its military assets is under Moscow control.¹⁷ Russian indirect intrusion in the Alliance networks would engender a difficult conundrum, especially at a time when menaces are not easy to tackle because of problems in identifying the main source of the attack.¹⁸

This is particularly the case as regards the cyber dimension, whereby Allies face a sort of tragedy of the commons. While a pooling of resources and expertise at the multinational level would in fact be beneficial, member states tend to jealously guard their competences related to sensible areas traditionally confined under national sovereignty. The allusion here is clearly to intelligence, to whom more than a few criticisms have been sparked within NATO because of its very limited sharing.¹⁹ The suspension of collaboration between the US and the UK after the New York Times' publication of confidential material related to the terrorist attacks during Ariana Grande's exhibition in Manchester clearly epitomises the problems of collective action,²⁰ which are expected to occur only partially in a family of Allies.

Going backwards, responsibility for low progress when it comes to intelligence is also shared with NATO as a whole, since the appointment of the Hungarian Sándor Laborc at the apex of the intelligence committee after his training at the KGB academy during the 1980s represents an inaccurate and superficial decision.²¹ Apart from wondering how a NATO member state could decide to assign the sensitive position of chief of intelligence to an official with such a controversial experience, it is conceivable that his appointment at NATO has contributed to preventing positive developments in information sharing among member states. A direct correlation is here with the abovementioned huge internal concern NATO has to face with, namely the diverging approaches retained in foreign and defence policy by its member states and the current lack of a reconciling vision.

Against this backdrop of concerns, it seems that NATO suffers mainly from the absence of politico-strategic discussions on major regional and global issues. In spite of debates taking place within formal meetings and the establishment of committees dealing with sectorial or geographical topics, there is no upstream

¹⁷ Giorgio Di Mizio, "Turchia: i missili S-400 tra Russia e Nato, match anticipato", in *AffarInternazionali*, 27 April 2018, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=69293>.

¹⁸ Andrea Aversano Stabile, "Settant'anni di Nato. Tra Turchia, Russia e cyber, la pensione può attendere", in *Formiche*, 4 April 2019, <https://formiche.net/2019/04/nato-turchia-russia-cyber-70>.

¹⁹ Judy Dempsey, "NATO's Intelligence Deficit: It's the Members, Stupid!", in *Strategic Europe*, 25 May 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/70086>.

²⁰ Will Worley, "US Takes Full Responsibility for Manchester Attack Intelligence Leaks, Rex Tillerson Says", in *The Independent*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/rex-tillerson-us-manchester-attack-intelligence-leaks-uk-snap-visit-secretary-of-state-photos-salman-a7757746.html>.

²¹ Bruno Waterfield, "Former KGB Chief Takes Job with NATO", in *The Telegraph*, 5 February 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1577711/Former-KGB-chief-takes-job-with-Nato.html>.

opportunity to develop a common position open to compromise and not necessarily leading to military intervention.²²

Nearly 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO's overarching approach needs a review in light of recent and current views developed at national level within member states. For instance, NATO was not sufficiently involved in the US unilateral withdrawal from the INF after Russia violations of its provisions, and the issue has yet to be properly taken among allies. Addressing this internal loophole is the stepping stone to effectively tackle current perils coming from both the eastern and the southern flanks, as well as fast-approaching troubles such as in the Arctic region. To this end, while a reform of the decision-making process towards qualified majority as opposed to unanimity would represent an unrealistic objective, a slight modification of the praxis within the Alliance should be welcomed.

In a challenging global scenario, the establishment of thematic and sectorial working groups could allow for timely and far-sighted political discussions among NATO members in order to improve internal cohesion and assessment on a long-term horizon. In order to be effective, these panels need to be composed of working-level delegates representing not all NATO members but rather those willing to debate on a certain issue in light of its relevance for their national agendas. Depending on the occasions, working-level participants may be gathered from different sectors, namely institutional, military and subject matter experts.

Due to the huge number of issues and security threats NATO is facing with, the participation to one working group should be intended as nonexclusive, meaning that Allies are eligible for gathering in more than one configuration. Yet, the absence of prominent members from some tables does not mean they are set aside as working groups are not the seat to adopt binding positions for the whole Alliance. Rather, such limited configurations allow for preparatory debates among countries whose national security is directly affected by a specific issue.

In addition, geographic working groups could be helpful in framing threats, especially with reference to diverging national views on the Eastern and the Southern flanks. For instance, while the working group focusing on East and the Russian threat would gather countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, as well as the US, etc., the one dealing with the South and the Mediterranean area could envisage at least Allies like France, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and also the US considering their role in this region too.

As working groups would clearly involve countries at the forefront with the issues under the spotlight in geographical, political and military terms, such configurations

²² Judy Dempsey, "NATO Just Turned 70 – and It's Showing Its Age", in *The Washington Post*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/04/04/nato-just-turned-its-showing-its-age>.

allowing for debates on state-of-the-art, shared assessments, possible scenarios, eventual actions and so forth may contribute to the identification of most pressing needs to be tackled at a certain moment without neglecting others. At the same time, these configurations may be helpful to raise awareness also on topics currently disregarded but likely to gain significance in the future. With regard to the Arctic threat, the gathering of concerned countries like Canada, Denmark, Norway and the US within the specific working group may help developing a common position contributing to regulate conflicting interests with non-NATO members over the exploitation of resources in the region.

Ad hoc configurations are not meant to act on behalf of formal meetings, nor to lead to a regionalisation of NATO. Avoiding the latter point is a stepping stone of Alliance's overarching approach and mandate, as there should be no prioritisation of interests belonging to a limited group of countries.²³ Therefore, since regionalisation would further compromise the already precarious unity of the Alliance, working groups may only act as a catalyst, for instance through the formulation of opinions or recommendations, to improve and steer decision-making taking place through formal processes.

With the next accession of North Macedonia after the resolution of the long-lasting contention over the namesake with Greece,²⁴ an Alliance of 30 member states is not easily comparable to a family. However, NATO represents the unique international place where most of continental Europe countries, Turkey, the UK, Canada and the US sit at the same table not to compete but to act together. Therefore, recurrent and tailored working group meetings may have a therapeutic effect in fortifying NATO's twist and mitigate natural divisions and internal tensions. In sum, NATO is unlikely to suddenly become a blood covenant among brothers because of the absence of a fully recognised external enemy. Yet, while acknowledging past and current successes, it should intervene to install remedies in order to prevent the risk of ending up as Cain and Abel did.

Updated 25 June 2019

²³ Martin Zapfe, "Threatened from Within? NATO, Trump and Institutional Adaptation", in Oliver Thränert and Martin Zapfe (eds), *Strategic Trends 2017*, 3 April 2019, p. 73-93, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000170137>.

²⁴ Kole Casule, "'Welcome to North Macedonia': New Road Signs Go Up on Border with Greece", in *Reuters*, 13 February 2019, <https://reut.rs/2GGr4Bo>.

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