

Seven paradoxes of NATO's revival as Europe's primary security institution

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*Should EU states prioritise foreign policy cooperation through the EU or through NATO? **Alexander Mattelaer** writes that the balance between the EU and NATO has tipped increasingly toward the latter in recent years. However, he argues that this trend is no cause for transatlantic celebration as Brexit, upheaval in Turkey and other developments threaten to undermine the West's security architecture.*



Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Credit: Public Domain

Ever since the 2014 Wales Summit, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been making a scarcely noticed comeback as Europe's primary security institution. The heads of state and government [proclaimed](#) 'a pivotal moment in Euro-Atlantic security' and took a series of far-reaching decisions. When they met again in Warsaw in July 2016 it became clear that the Alliance had indeed turned a corner. In several ways, however, this evolution has been riddled by paradox and surprise. In this contribution I highlight seven paradoxes characterising this past trajectory, setting the stage for an in-depth review of the transatlantic relationship once Donald Trump takes office.

1. Fractured US politics, but consensus on NATO

First, while the political landscape in the US is deeply fractured, a strong bipartisan consensus on NATO persists. Democrats and Republicans may agree on little else, but the idea that European allies are important remains fundamentally unchallenged. The Trump campaign obviously ruffled some feathers with the [suggestion that US support in case of attack is not unconditional](#). Despite Trump's characteristic theatrics, similar concerns over transatlantic burden-sharing are widely shared across the US defence community. Even Barack Obama – a President much more liberal and dovish than Hillary Clinton would have been – loudly [complained about European free-riding behaviour](#). On few issues is the US position so clear as on NATO: the alliance matters, but allies must pull their weight, or else...

2. NATO's revival despite talk of a European army

Second, while talk about a European army has newfound popularity – at least in the media – the real debate about European defence has swerved back to NATO. At the same time, even far-reaching decisions (such as those on setting up an [enhanced forward presence in Poland and the Baltic states](#)) are met with little more than a yawn. In the United Kingdom, the idea that the EU might set up a military headquarters is treated as a matter of more serious concern than the posting of UK troops in Estonia. Even as the latter play the role of trip-wire for what could conceivably amount to world war three, such commitments do not raise meaningful debate. NATO's comeback, as evident as it is to the defence community, has occurred in relative silence in the public debate about European affairs.

3. Rising European defence spending

Third, contrary to all expectations, European defence expenditure trends are slowly turning up. The NATO defence investment pledge undertaken at the Wales summit was at the time met with considerable scepticism. But ever since, [an increasing number of allies have been hiking up their defence budgets](#), some of them very significantly so. Perhaps even more of a surprise is the security policy turn-around in Germany, traditionally one of the most reluctant allies. In sync with a new defence white paper, [Berlin announced](#) an increase of its number of military personnel as well as a 1.7 billion euro defence budget hike for 2017 (corresponding to a 6.8% rise from earlier plans). When [German social-democrats start making the case for defence](#), you know something is afoot.

4. A familiar strategy in a time of change

Fourth, despite all the talk about the changing character of war, the key tenets of NATO's strategy in 2016 look decidedly familiar. Without much controversy, the Warsaw summit declaration dusted off the language on nuclear deterrence. 'Any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict', [the summit communiqué read](#). Message to Moscow: don't even think about scenarios of nuclear de-escalation following a conventional land-grab. Simultaneously, the forward stationing of NATO units along the alliance's eastern flank (through a system of rotational deployments) served to give material credibility to the article five commitment. While enlargement has changed the geography of the alliance, current defence planning efforts display a remarkable conceptual continuity with those of the Cold War. As [one observant journalist remarked](#), 'Europe's militaries are once again training in earnest for war in their own backyard.'

5. Disinformation tactics

Fifth, despite the familiarity of the military aspects of NATO's posture, the non-military dimension to geopolitical competition has continued to increase in importance. Both Russia and the so-called Islamic State have proven themselves to be most proficient in leveraging disinformation tactics as the centrepiece of their campaign for undermining the unity and cohesion of Western societies. Years of operational experience in the Balkans and Afghanistan familiarised NATO with the importance of the so-called 'comprehensive approach'. Yet still, the alliance's political leadership seems to be caught off guard by the idea that other actors may pursue a similar line of reasoning and target the hearts and minds of all disaffected constituencies in the West.

6. European defence as crisis management

Sixth, while European political leaders may [talk the talk that 'defence matters'](#), they continue to approach the new defence debate with earlier crisis management operations in mind. Many seem to approach collective defence plans through the methodology and vocabulary of crisis management: forces need to be made available and command caveats can be imposed on their use. Yet preparations for collective defence are far from being non-committal exercises. In case of actual conflict there may well be no time for additional political deliberation and guidance. Such strategic thoughtlessness is all the more remarkable given that many allies have also started employing their armed forces for other purposes on their national territory, ranging from refugee management to counter-terrorism tasks.

Even as the security environment has deteriorated considerably, the idea that soldiers ultimately serve to kill or be killed in the defence of their country continues to be relatively alien to most European audiences.

7. Geopolitical turbulence

Seventh, NATO's revival is no cause for transatlantic celebrations, because at the same time the broader Western architecture continues to disintegrate. The United Kingdom has chosen to leave the European Union, Turkey struggles to overcome the recent coup d'état while remaining anchored in the West, and the domestic politics of many allies are nothing but precarious. In that sense, NATO's comeback is not a sign of Western unity, but rather a signal of distress in a new era of geopolitical turbulence.

When Donald Trump and all other NATO heads of state and government meet in Brussels in the spring of 2017, they will confront a situation that in terms of uncertainty and danger has perhaps more in common with the 1950s than with any other period in the alliance's history. Can they continue to set store by the strategic concept their predecessors endorsed in 2010, at a time when economic clouds darkened but geopolitical rivalry still seemed a long way off? It may not be the most auspicious moment for transatlantic renewal, but that does not make it any less urgent. When the fabric of Western liberal democracy is fraying, time may be running out.

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