Policy Paper

What Next for NATO?

Views from the North-East Flank on Alliance Adaptation

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Introduction

At their meeting in London in December 2019, NATO leaders invited Secretary General Stoltenberg to present a proposal for "a forward-looking reflection process under his auspices, drawing on relevant expertise, to further strengthen NATO's political dimension including consultation."[1] To support this reflection process, the Secretary General appointed a group of experts and invited them to offer "recommendations to reinforce Alliance unity, increase political consultation and coordination between Allies, and strengthen NATO's political role."[2] Secretary General Stoltenberg will present the outcomes of the expert group's considerations and a set of recommendations to NATO leaders during their next summit, which is expected to take place in late 2021.

The period surrounding NATO's 70th anniversary has perhaps been the most turbulent of its post-Cold War history

NATO advocates have claimed that the strength and longevity of the Alliance, in particular in the period following the end of the Cold War, can in large part be attributed to its ability to adapt and remain relevant in changing circumstances while retaining its core values.[3] NATO has on several occasions embarked on programmes of adaptation following formal deliberative processes, such as those that produced the 1967 Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance (the 'Harmel Report') and the 2010 Group of Experts report, *NATO 2020: Assured Security, Dynamic Engagement*, that led to a new (and still current) strategic concept.[4] NATO has also adapted more organically, through the day-to-day business of discussion and implementation of new policies in the North Atlantic Council. This less structured process can also result in fundamental change, such as the renewal of NATO's emphasis on collective defence and deterrence after 2014.

Anniversaries too are often occasions for organisations not only to celebrate, but also to reflect and refresh. The period surrounding NATO's 70th anniversary has perhaps been the most turbulent of its post-Cold War history. The Covid-19 pandemic, a hugely disruptive event, has challenged NATO and the West more broadly and looks set to shape security policies, in one form or another, for years to come. But even before the pandemic, NATO faced sobering questions about its future. The Alliance continued to be confronted by substantial external challenges—notably a resurgent Russia and persistent instability on its southern borders, as well as uncertainty as to how to respond to a rising China. But it was the internal tensions, prompted largely by an absence of US leadership, that most contributed—and continue to contribute in the closing years of the

[1] NATO, "London Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019," Press Release (2019) 115, 4 December 2019, paragraph 7.
[2] The group is co-chaired by Thomas de Maizière (Germany) and Wess Mitchell (United States); its members are Greta Bossenmaier (Canada), Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (Denmark), Hubert Védrine (France), Marta Dassù (Italy), Herna Verhagen (The Netherlands), Anna Fotyga (Poland), Tacan Ildem (Turkey) and John Bew (United Kingdom): NATO, "Secretary General appoints group as part of NATO reflection process," 31 March 2020.
[3] For example: Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, "How to keep Nato fit for purpose in years to come," *The Financial Times*, 10 May 2020; Peter Ricketts. "What's the secret of Nato's long life? It's not just a military pact," *The Guardian*, 2 April 2019; Rachel Ellehuus, "NATO at 70—Shaping the Future for the Next 70 Years," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 April 2019.
[4] NATO, "Harmel Report," 16 November 2017; NATO, "Experts group presents report on new Strategic Concept for NATO," 17 May 2010.

2010s—to the perception that the Atlantic Alliance is an alliance in crisis.[5]

Against this background and the deliberations of the Secretary General's group of experts—only one of whom represents the 14 of 30 Allies who have joined NATO since 1999—this policy paper sets out issues, concerns and expectations about NATO's future adaptation from the perspective of the three Baltic states and Poland. Our paper is based on a series of interviews conducted in March and April 2020 with several senior officials and members of the expert community in each of the four states. In order to encourage frankness, these interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis. Following a brief discussion of the circumstances in which NATO currently finds itself, we set out views from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland on the threats facing NATO, the tasks it should undertake, the operational domains it should be active in, aspects of its political dimension, its internal challenges, and the desirability of a new strategic concept. We conclude with recommendations based on these views for NATO's further adaptation.

Allies to NATO's west and south do not all consider the threat from Russia to be as grave as do the eastern Allies

1. NATO at 70

Seventy years after its formation, NATO is challenged from both outside and from within. The two are closely linked, as the inability of the Allies to see fully eye to eye on the nature and severity of the external challenges, and on NATO's proper response to them, is itself a source of internal tension.

Few would disagree that Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 profoundly affected European security, breaking the period of relative, if sometimes uneasy stability that followed the end of the Cold War. NATO's response was to place renewed emphasis on the first of its core tasks—collective defence.[6] The Allies implemented a range of measures including, most visibly, the establishment of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.[7] These measures, which also include the enhancement of the NATO Response Force and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the agreement of the Defence Investment Pledge and the adoption of the NATO Readiness Initiative have dominated the NATO Agenda since 2014.[8] They have largely reflected the prevailing security perceptions of the eastern members of the Alliance, who see Russia as a serious threat, intent on dividing the West and perhaps risking military adventurism in pursuit of this goal. But Allies to NATO's west and south, while supporting and mostly participating in eFP, do not all consider the threat from Russia to be as grave as do the eastern Allies.

The inability of the Allies to see fully eye to eye on the nature and severity of the external challenges is a source of internal tension

Some also argue that Europe needs to do more to address security challenges from its south, which may even involve engaging Russia as a security partner. Several of the western and southern Allies want NATO to put greater emphasis on its core task of cooperative security and to more credibly implement its '360-degree approach', through which it is expected to be both able to deter threats from its east and take a more focused and strategic approach to

[5] Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, *NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2019), 13.

[6] NATO defines its three essential core tasks as collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security: NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 November 2010* (Brussels: NATO, 2010), 7-8.

[7] NATO, "Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast", 21 January 2019.

[8] Heinrich Brauss, Kalev Stoicescu and Tony Lawrence, *Capability and Resolve: Deterrence, Security and Stability in the Baltic Region* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2020), 6-7.

dealing with the challenges of terrorism and violent extremism to its south. Indeed, many of these Allies see these threats as more serious than the threat from Russia.[9]

Mediterranean countries, particularly France and Turkey, have thus advocated for collective solutions to address security challenges from the south, which the eastern Allies fear will divert resources from deterrence in the east.[10] Turkey's determination to ensure NATO's consideration of its own agenda in this regard has seen it block a defence plan for Poland and the Baltic states on the grounds that NATO had failed to recognise the Syrian Kurdish YPG as a terrorist threat, while at the same time procuring Russian S-400 air defence systems, a move that eventually resulted in its expulsion from the F-35 programme.[11] France, meanwhile, has led the argument that Europe should be able to do more, independently, for its own security—that it should build European Strategic Autonomy. French motivations include a desire to encourage European states to participate in crisis management and collective security operations on Europe's borders, especially in Africa, and more generally to make Europe less dependent on the US for security.[12] The eastern Allies and others (notably the UK) have expressed concerns that such a move will partially duplicate, undermine and weaken NATO.[13]

Differing views on the scope and nature of the threats facing NATO and the proper responses to it, while perhaps inevitable given the diversity of geography and historical experience across the Alliance, are nonetheless a source of discord and a risk to cohesion among the member states—particularly when positions are taken that seem not to appreciate the sensitivities and concerns of others. The potential impact on NATO of the new security order that President Macron has called for Europe to negotiate with Russia has, for example, been a cause of much worry for the eastern Allies and others.[14] And while Macron has been clear that European Strategic Autonomy is not intended as an alternative to NATO, his provocative explanation that is needed because of the "brain death" of the Alliance further heightened the suspicions of the eastern Allies as well as causing others to bristle.[15]

France may be a vocal and sometimes—at any rate for the eastern Allies— disquieting Ally, but it is at least active in its attempts to shape Europe's future security environment. It is a further sign of an Alliance in difficulty that few of its members are ready to offer constructive ideas for its future development. Not every Ally can take a leadership role, but some might be expected to make a contribution in the present circumstances if NATO were a more vibrant organisation. The UK, for example, has been enormously distracted by Brexit, a process that has damaged UK thinking on security to the extent that it has even suggested that cooperation with its EU neighbours might be held hostage if its (non-related) negotiating aims are not accepted.[16] Germany, despite promises

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[9] Ian Lesser, "Emerging security challenges in NATO's southern neighbourhood," Elcano Royal Institute, 3 July 2019.
[10] Judy Dempsey, "The Three Unresolved Issues of NATO," Carnegie Europe, 5 December 2019.
[11] Patrick Wintour, "Turkey denies blackmailing Nato over Baltics defence plan," *The Guardian*, 3 December 2019; Aaron Mehta, "Turkey officially kicked out of F-35 program, costing US half a billion dollars," *Defense News*, 17 July 2019.
[12] Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov, European Strategic Autonomy. *Operationalising a Buzzword* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2019), 10-11.
[13] Ibid, 11-12.
[14] Gustav Gressel, Kadri Liik, Jeremy Shapiro and Tara Varma, "Emmanuel Macron's very big idea on Russia," European Council on Foreign Relations, 25 September 2019.
[15] "Conférence sur la sécurité de Munich : faire revivre l'Europe comme une puissance politique stratégique [Munich Security Conference: Reviving Europe as a Strategic Political Power]," Élysée, 15 February 2020; "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead," *The Economist*, 7 November 2019; Rym Momtaz and Andrew Gray, "Macron stands by NATO 'brain death' remarks but tries to reassure allies," *Politico*, 29 November 2019.
[16] Dan Sabbagh, "Ex-MI6 chief criticises threat to withdraw security cooperation with EU," *The Guardian*, 9 October 2019.

in 2015 that it was ready to take on a more active role in security matters, and despite increasing its defence budget, has largely remained conservative and reticent.[17]

But the greatest failure of leadership has come from the US. Under President Trump, the US has not only abdicated its expected leadership role, but has on occasion actively undermined the Alliance. However divisive Macron's rhetoric may sometimes be, the impact of his words is nothing compared to the division sown by President Trump, whose commitment to NATO and European security has been inconsistent at best. Trump has some legitimate complaints, notably over Europe's lack of action to address the shortfalls in its weak and disjointed military capabilities, and over the failure of many European Allies to spend 2% of GDP on defence as they have agreed under the NATO Defence Investment Pledge.[18] Furthermore, the Trump Administration has in practice enhanced the US role on NATO's north-east flank, including through increased funding for the European Deterrence Initiative (which, despite some resistance from Congress, will in 2021 have declined for two consecutive years after a peak in 2019) and by the deployment of more troops, especially to Poland.[19] The Administration and its supporters have frequently urged the European Allies to focus on the President's actions, rather than his tweets. Nonetheless, Trump's calling into question of the US commitment to the Alliance's Article 5 mutual defence clause, his open admiration of authoritarian leaders, his view that the US does or should provide security on a transactional basis, and his barely hidden message that Europe should buy American defence equipment have alarmed Allies. Burden sharing, always a difficult subject in the Alliance has, through Trump's interventions, become a toxic one.

The US has not only abdicated its expected leadership role, but has on occasion actively undermined the Alliance

Under the Trump presidency, the US has begun to demand the more active participation of the European Allies in countering China

More broadly, US security interests have, over the course of several administrations, shifted towards the Asia-Pacific region. This trend has been accompanied by a lessening of interest in Europe and an expectation that the European Allies would take a greater share of their own security burden to compensate for the US shift.[20] Under the Trump presidency, however, the US has begun to demand the more active participation of the European Allies in countering China, presenting the Europeans with the uncomfortable dilemma of wanting to partner when possible with China, while at the same relying for security on a US that—with bipartisan support—views China as a revisionist power.[21] This situation is set to be

[17] Joachim Gauck, "Germany's role in the world: Reflections on responsibility, norms and alliances," Munich Security Conference, 31 January 2014; Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Speech by Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier at the 50th Munich Security Conference," 1 February 2014; Ursula von der Leyen, "Speech on the Occasion of the 50th Munich Security Conference," 31 January 2014; Judy Dempsey, "NATO Needs a German Voice Now," Carnegie Europe, 26 November 2019.

[18] Claudia Major, "The Role of Capabilities in the Transatlantic Defense Relationship," Carnegie Europe, 30 October 2019; NATO, "Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018," Press Release (2018) 074, 11 July 2018, paragraph 36.

[19] The Department of Defense has requested USD 4.5 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative for FY 2021, as compared to USD 5.9 billion and USD 6.5 billion enacted in FYs 2020 and 2019: Department of Defense (US), Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), "European Deterrence Initiative. Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2021", February 2020, 2; Aaron Mehta, "European Defense Initiative funding drops in defense budget request," *Defense News*, 10 February 2020; Marcin Goclowski,"Warsaw, Washington agree on locations for new U.S. troops in Poland," *Reuters*, 30 August 2019.

[20] Janan Ganesh, "US shift to Asia is more than a short-term pivot," *The Financial Times*, 20 February 2019.

[21] Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Mario Esteban, "Introduction," in *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry*, ed. Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero-Iglesias along with Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Alice Ekman, Lucrezia

complicated further as the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic is likely both to accelerate, perhaps dangerously, the decline of already antagonistic US-China relations, and to prompt European states to rethink their dealings with China.[22]

Under Trump, the US also sees NATO as a vehicle for its China policy. Speaking at a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in April 2019, for example, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued that "We must adapt our alliance to confront emerging threats ... whether that's Russian aggression, uncontrolled migration, cyber attacks, threats to energy security, Chinese strategic competition, including technology and 5G, and many other issues."[23] US persistence on this issue eventually resulted in NATO's first explicit acknowledgment that the Alliance had a strategic interest in China: "We recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."[24] The cautious tone indicates that NATO is far from having a well-defined and agreed policy towards China. This issue, likely to be further complicated as many Allies face potentially competing demands from the parallel development of the EU's common position on China, looks set to continue to be a source of transatlantic frustration as the Alliance deliberates on its future.

Defence budgets will most likely fall as the downstream effects of the Covid-19 pandemic begin to bite, presenting Allies with difficult investment choices

This period ahead looks likely to be a complex one. On top of the ongoing external and internal challenges, defence budgets will most likely fall as the downstream effects of the Covid-19 pandemic begin to bite, presenting Allies with difficult investment choices. While the Allies have given much practical support to each other during the crisis, their lack of unity at least in their initial responses may also be a further source of tensions, requiring the Alliance to rethink its tasks if it is demonstrate its relevance and preserve public support.

2. Views from the North-East Flank

We set out here views, concerns and expectations of the three Baltic states and Poland with regard to various aspects of NATO's further adaptation. This section of our policy paper is based on interviews conducted in March and April 2020 with several senior officials and members of the expert community in each of the four states. Although the opinions expressed by our interviewees are generally similar, and on most issues are very close indeed, some nuances and differences of view are nonetheless evident. These are differences between the opinions of individuals, rather than differences between state positions. While the interviewed officials were all experts in security and defence policy and expressed views on NATO that are representative of their national policies, none of the four states appears to have developed a formal position on the specific question of the outcomes they desire from the Stoltenberg reflection process; nor have they officially consulted each other on this question. The following may thus be most accurately characterised as views *from* the Baltic states and Poland, that rather than the views *of* the Baltic states and Poland.

2.1. The Threat

Poland has been a member of NATO since 1999, and the three Baltic states joined the Alliance in 2004. It is worth stressing at the outset that interviewees in all four states regarded the Alliance as absolutely fundamental to both their

Poggetti, Björn Jerdén, John Seaman, Tim Summers and Justyna Szczudlik (European Think-tank Network on China, 2020), 20.

[22] Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "From 'Respect' to 'Sick and Twisted': How Coronavirus Hit U.S.-China Ties," *The New York Times*, 15 May 2020; John Seaman, "Introduction: China as partner, competitor and rival amid Covid-19," in *Covid-19 and Europe-China Relations: A country-level analysis*, ed. John Seaman (European Think-tank Network on China, 2020), 9-10.

[23] Lesley Wroughton and David Brunnstrom, "Pompeo calls on NATO to adapt to new threats from Russia, China," *Reuters*, 4 April 2019.

[24] NATO, "London Declaration," paragraph 6.

own and to wider European security. As the international organisation that most obviously represents the West, NATO fulfils an essential role in bringing together and binding its North American and European members for the common purpose of providing security. It is the most visible demonstration of a transatlantic approach to security that has proved, over decades, to be both substantial and cost effective. It is an irreplaceable institution.

The need for an Alliance to provide collective security implies the existence of one or more threats. Interviewees in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland all considered that NATO in fact faces a multitude of threats, but of these by far the most serious is Russia. Thus for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, NATO's principal task today and for the foreseeable future will be to deter and if necessary defend against Russian aggression in their region and more widely.

Maintaining a balance between the security interests of all Allies is an essential job for the Alliance

While the four states have always worried about Russia and attempted to highlight to others the threat it poses, its readiness to use military force in Europe to achieve political objectives, as demonstrated through the illegal annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, was a wake-up call for the Alliance as a whole. Russia has, since 2014, continued to stand firm in the face of international condemnation and economic sanctions and has given no indication that it is ready to change its approach to dealing with its neighbours or, indeed, the rest of the world. It does little to conceal its desire to weaken the West, making any form of rapprochement unlikely. The states of the Baltic region are thus deeply sceptical of unilateral moves towards Russia, for example President Macron's initiative to include Russia in the negotiation of a new security order. They are worried by any lack of resolve when it comes to dealing robustly with Russia and would prefer that their Allies took stronger coordinated measures to distance themselves from Russia in other spheres—such as economics, trade and energy—to deprive it as far as possible of tools of influence. For example, not only President Trump's seeming indifference about Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, but also his apparent reluctance to maintain economic sanctions against Russia, and Germany's continued support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, were both cited as concerns.

Nonetheless, the four states support NATO's 360-degree approach and are ready to back efforts to deal with threats from other regions too. As a general principle, interviewees argued that maintaining a balance between the security interests of all Allies is an essential job for the Alliance. Even though it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between issues of concern to NATO and issues of concern to individual Allies, NATO must do all it can to remain relevant to all its member states. At the same time, it is necessary to consider the Alliance's effectiveness and to calculate where it can contribute, where it risks overstretch, and where other tools may be more applicable. In practical terms, the four states thus take the view that NATO should focus most on its treaty area. It is, fundamentally, a defensive alliance.

The threat of terrorism from Europe's south was, however, frequently cited by interviewees as a pressing challenge for the Alliance. While they thought that the terrorist threat to their own states was quite low and of little direct concern, they were motivated to take an active role in dealing with this threat to demonstrate and build solidarity with the Allies for whom it is a more pressing issue. Interviewees did, however, note with concern that Russia and China are active in the regions associated with the terrorist threat—North Africa and the wider Middle East—and indicated support for Alliance presence in these regions to prevent Russia and China from either attempting to undermine stability and provoke threats to NATO states, or otherwise exploiting any power vacuum that may result from a lack of western presence and influence.

NATO faces a multitude of threats, but of these by far the most serious is Russia

Although Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland mostly view the terrorist threat as the second most urgent facing NATO, and are supportive, for example, of NATO continuing its missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, they generally believe that NATO's efforts in this direction, and their own contributions to these efforts, should be moderate. This is not because they regard the threat to be unimportant, but because they believe the threat from Russia to be of far greater magnitude and more demanding of the Alliance's and in particular their own resources—Russia retains an impressive array of conventional and nuclear armaments and is an existential threat to NATO states in the way that, for example ISIS, is not. Furthermore, they believe that while counter-terrorism has a military component, it is not a solely military, or even a military-led activity. Thus NATO should not have primacy and should take a supporting role, while focusing its resources where it can and does have a lead—on military deterrence and defence against state actors.

Their largest concern is that in response to the Chinese challenge, the US will concentrate on the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of Europe

Interviewees in the four states applied similar thinking with regard to threats from areas such as the high north and Arctic, and the North Atlantic. These regions are more directly associated with the Russian threat (as well as with the challenge from China) and NATO certainly needs to take an interest in them. However, they considered that they lack capacity to make a meaningful contribution to dealing with these threats and argued that their own limited resources were better applied to dealing with the threat from Russia on NATO's north-east flank.

One particularly difficult aspect of balancing the security interests of the Allies is deciding on NATO's role in dealing with China. China, unlike Russia, has never been a historical threat to the Baltic region, and even though it is by any measure more powerful than Russia, interviewees in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland preferred to characterise it as a long-term challenge and not a priority for NATO (in contrast to the immediate, short-term threat from Russia). The four states certainly have concerns related to China, including the risks associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, but they generally regard themselves as being quite resilient when it comes to guarding against Chinese efforts to secure influence through investments and infrastructure on their own territories and are not large trading partners with China. They also worry about collaboration between China and Russia. But their largest concern is that in response to the Chinese challenge, the US will concentrate on the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of Europe, in particular their own region, leaving the door open to destabilisation by Russia. This concern is exacerbated by worries that the US will become more demanding in its expectation of a greater Alliance contribution to dealing with China and they reluctantly expect that NATO will probably also need to focus more on the Asia-Pacific region. They assess, though, that NATO has little capacity to directly check China in its own backyard and there is a risk in attempting to do so that it will undermine its own credibility as a global actor. The four states would prefer to focus mulitilateral efforts instead on countering Chinese espionage, disinformation, and inroads into critical infrastructure in Europe and its neighbourhood—although they acknowledged that not all of these issues are lead roles, or even necessarily roles at all, for NATO.

More broadly, there was something of a divergence of views amongst interviewees in the four states over the extent to which the Alliance can and should act beyond its area of responsibility. Some interviewees believed that while a fully global role for NATO might be possible in theory, the Alliance currently lacks the necessary capabilities for such a role. It would need more investment in, for example, maritime and intelligence assets; furthermore, its capacity for strategic analysis and foresight and planning is currently insufficient. Above all, however, the creation of a truly global NATO would be limited by an absence of will amongst the Allies, and a lack of consensus on the priorities should they engage on this scale. Once again, these interviewees suggested, NATO

should focus on its own area of responsibility and immediate neighbourhood, rather than weaken itself by being overly ambitious.

On the other hand, some interviewees argued that the notion of an insulated Euro-Atlantic area is dated. While operating in the Euro-Atlantic area might be a baseline, it cannot be NATO's only concern if the Alliance is to take a credible role in addressing modern threats and challenges. There is thus a need to balance NATO's role in addressing global risks with the Alliance's original Euro-Atlantic scope. In this respect, the four states acknowledge that there is a range of threats that are not specific to particular actors or bound by particular geography, such as those posed by climate change, migration, the malicious uses of new technologies (including cyber), energy supply coercion, natural disasters and proxy conflict. They recognise that these may be challenges to NATO in their own right, but also that they might be exacerbated by, for example, Russian or Chinese policies and actions. They broadly agree that NATO has a role in these areas and must address at least some of these threats wherever they arise, but caution against seeking a NATO role for the sake of it, preferring to consider carefully where NATO can add value. In other words, NATO should be selective in its responses, and should seek to cooperate with other organisations that may be better suited to lead in dealing with such threats, particularly the EU.

The Alliance's continuing credibility and success relies heavily on its ability to generate functioning deterrence on its eastern flank

The balance required here, interviewees suggested, will be a difficult one to identify. Allies will disagree, and there may be frictions between policy makers and citizens, making this dilemma a serious threat to NATO's cohesion and stability. They felt it important to stress in this regard the difference between the more passive process of maintaining situational awareness, and active engagement with a problem. It is crucial to recognise that having an item on the Alliance agenda does not necessarily mean that NATO is bound to take action.

2.2. NATO's Tasks

NATO has more than one way to deal with any of the threats it faces. Interviewees in the four states agreed that the Alliance should retain the three core tasks set out in the 2010 strategic concept—collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Of these tasks, and closely connected with their view that Russia is the primary security threat to the Alliance and its members, they strongly agreed that collective defence is the most important. This is the fundamental business of the Alliance, expressed in the Washington Treaty's key article—Article 5—and is the task that truly holds the Allies together. Any failure to protect Allies would have devastating consequences for NATO, which can, in any case, only engage in crisis management and cooperative security if it succeeds in collective defence.

The Alliance should retain the three core tasks set out in the 2010 strategic concept—collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland argue that this task should not only be retained, but it should also be strengthened, in particular as and where it relates to deterrence and defence against Russia. The bottom line is that the Alliance's continuing credibility and success relies heavily on its ability to generate functioning deterrence on its eastern flank. Yet, the balance of forces in north-eastern Europe remains strongly in Russia's, not NATO's favour. The operational and reinforcement challenges related to the fragile connection of the Baltic states to the rest of NATO territory via the Suwałki corridor need to be addressed and there are critical capability shortfalls in areas such as early warning and air

defence. Higher levels of defence spending will be necessary for this core task to become more credible.

Crisis management—at least in the sense described in the 2010 strategic concept—has assumed less importance in the minds of Baltic and Polish interviewees since the drawdown from Afghanistan and Iraq, although they recognise the possible requirement for NATO to use military force in addressing crises beyond its borders in the future, and the importance of their contributing troops to such operations. Interviewees felt that NATO is generally better suited to higher end crisis management operations than it is to peacekeeping and humanitarian work, for which it lacks the mandate and structures. They thus emphasised that NATO should be selective in accepting crisis response tasks, and noted that when it comes to any crisis management operation outside NATO territory, Alliance cohesion is both especially vital, and also vulnerable.

Interviewees in the four states argued, however, that the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised another facet of NATO's wider role in crisis management—the need to be able to respond collectively, and largely within its own borders in support of the civil authorities, to international situations that threaten security (while at the same time maintaining readiness for deterrence and defence). Such a role would allow the Alliance to demonstrate its continuing relevance; indeed, if it is unable to contribute in this and similar areas, its value is likely to be questioned and its future at risk.

The Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised that NATO needs to be able to respond collectively, and largely within its own borders, in support of the civil authorities to international situations that threaten security

Interviewees recognised that NATO's response to Covid-19 had, unfortunately, been underwhelming. The Alliance was taken by surprise and the lack of collective action had undermined the transatlantic relationship and the very notion of collective security. At the same time, deterrence and defence were weakened (for example, through the curbing of exercise Defender-Europe 2020) and the likely knock-on effects of reduced defence budgets and the prioritisation of medical response measures will similarly damage this key task. There is a risk that NATO adversaries could use this time to exploit the West's weaknesses using traditional and non-traditional means. The severity and scope of the Covid-19 crisis means that it is likely to dominate thinking about security for years to come. Interviewees broadly agreed that NATO must, if it is to remain relevant, be able to do more to react to this type of crisis. The core task of crisis management must thus reflect the lessons from Covid-19 pandemic and be given due emphasis as the Alliance moves forward.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland also place great value on the Alliance's core task of cooperative security. They see a need to try to influence security beyond NATO borders through partnerships, capacity building missions, and Alliance diplomacy. The aim of such activities is both to build security around the Alliance's perimeters and to avoid security vacuums that might be exploited by adversaries.

In engaging in cooperative security beyond the treaty area, the four states believe that NATO should pay most attention to its immediate vicinity—states in the eastern neighbourhood, the Balkans, south Caucasus, north and sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. Weaknesses in these states, which already today present the Alliance with security challenges, might be expected to be compounded by the Covid-19 crisis and there may be an increasing demand for NATO partnerships and missions. Russia and China, who have been keenly aware of the soft security benefits to be had in at least appearing to provide assistance to states in difficulty, may choose to compete more with NATO in this task. Nonetheless, interviewees in the four states believe that NATO will need to be selective, and to ensure that it has the will and capacity to engage properly if it is to make a genuine contribution to stability here.

Crisis management in the NATO area aside, most interviewees were cautious about extending the range of Alliance tasks and believed that NATO should not overstretch itself in an attempt to appear useful and relevant. Resilience-building inside the member states, for example, was largely considered to be national business, with some acknowledgment of the value of a light NATO touch in activities such as the sharing of best practice and coordination. On the other hand, interviewees stressed the need for NATO to remain flexible when it comes to considering tasks and missions that may go beyond the mainstream NATO agenda. The three core tasks set out in the strategic concept allow the Allies considerable latitude. Rather than being overly prescriptive, NATO should aim to foster cohesion and be ready to take on any tasks and missions to which the Allies collectively agree.

2.3. Operational Domains

Interviewees in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland all agreed that NATO should be—and indeed already is—active in non-traditional domains of conflict such as space, cyber and information. The four states believe themselves to be especially strong advocates of NATO's role in these domains, as evidenced by their hosting of relevant NATO Centres of Excellence (the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia, the NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence in Latvia, and the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Lithuania).[25] They argue that it is inevitable that future conflict will encompass these domains, and that NATO's involvement is necessary to ensure a coordinated response to any challenge that may threaten security, wherever it may arise. Furthermore, this involvement will also ensure that NATO can also be useful in peacetime (for example in assisting in the response to global pandemics).

These are complex and resource-intensive domains in which states are unlikely to be effective when acting alone. The diverse nature of the threat posed in these non-traditional domains requires NATO to have a new strategic vision to guide its response and a refocusing of investment and modernisation to address technology-based challenges such as space warfare, energy, hypersonic missiles, bio-warfare, electronic warfare and artificial intelligence. Hybrid threats are considered to be especially relevant to the Baltic states given their proximity to Russia and their large minority populations which may be susceptible to manipulation by an adversary.

Interviewees, though, focused their comments mostly on the cyber and information domains. They broadly agreed that NATO's cyber capacity needs improvement. Unlike traditional defence capabilities, NATO has no understanding of the individual Allies' capacities in this field. Furthermore, contrary to the traditional operational domains, other organisations—notably the EU—have a role in many of the newer operational domains, creating grey areas where civilian and military organisations both cooperate and compete. EU-NATO cooperation and the avoidance of duplication are thus essential elements of any cyber strategy. Similarly, in the field of information operations, while individual Allies have shown competent responses in terms of recognition, attribution and response, more international coordination, including by NATO, is needed if Russia and China are not to retain the upper hand they hold in this area.

The diverse nature of the threat posed in non-traditional domains requires NATO to have a new strategic vision to guide its response

Some interviewees, however, added notes of caution. Firstly, NATO is a culturally conservative organisation and, contrary to the call for greater international coordination, it may be that individual states have more speed and creativity to respond to some of these challenges—dealing with disinformation may be an example. Secondly, and related, while these newer

[25] Lithuania also leads the PESCO project on Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security. Poland hosts the NATO Counter Intelligence Centre of Excellence and the NATO Military Police Centre of Excellence.

operational domains may all be relevant to NATO, the Alliance must consider where it can add value and do so without risk of overreach. Analysis and discussion would be required to identify the capacities of adversaries and to prioritise NATO's response where most damage might be inflicted. This means, perhaps, putting stress on technologies that are potentially disruptive and may change the way that war is conducted. As with their considerations of the range of threats to and possible tasks of the Alliance, interviewees were concerned that any expansion of its remit should not have an adverse impact on its key task of kinetic defence and deterrence, in particular given the likely fall in defence budgets in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis.

The Alliance must consider where it can add value and do so without risk of overreach

2.4. The Political Dimension

Interviewees agreed that NATO should continue to engage actively with partners around the globe. For the three Baltic states and Poland, partnerships with other states in the region—in particular, Finland and Sweden—are especially important, but most interviewees also advocated partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, for example with Australia, Japan, and South Korea, to build a wider community of the like-minded and to raise and expand strategic awareness. Broadening the network of allies would, they suggested, be especially important given the growing strategic competition from China and Russia. NATO's partners should also be supported more, for example with technology, and the Allies should make efforts to reach out to more sceptical countries in its own region, such as Belarus, Serbia and Moldova.

Interviewees also agreed that dialogue with Russia should not be neglected, as the Allies need to present common positions on relevant issues. Some felt that this should be limited to lower levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy, with enhancement of both agenda and status possible subject to positive changes in Russia's behaviour; others that high-level issues of contention need to be addressed first, if day-to-day cooperation was not to lead, de facto, to business as usual. They stressed the need for a dual track approach of deterrence and dialogue, and argued that any upgrading of NATO's dialogue with Russia should go hand-in-hand with strengthening deterrence on the eastern flank.

All interviewees supported the future enlargement of NATO. NATO is fundamental for security, and benefits all its members. Enlargement, they argued, had strengthened not weakened the Alliance, while further enlargement would diminish the grey areas at NATO's borders. Furthermore, it was important that there should be no hint that NATO had allowed Russia's objections to enlargement to influence its policies. More parochially, interviewees also supported further enlargement on the basis that the candidate countries were likely to be sympathetic to eastern flank views, strengthening the Alliance in this direction.

However, interviewees recognised that enlargement is an unlikely prospect at present. There is a lack of will across the Alliance—even interviewees in the four states had some sympathy with the view that the Alliance is already too big and that a growth in membership would mean additional bureaucracy and more impediment to NATO's efficient functioning. Moreover, the candidate countries are simply not ready, and are unlikely to be so for a long period yet. Just as it should accept no third party vetoes over enlargement, so the Alliance should continue to insist that candidates must meet its membership criteria. In these circumstances, interviewees agreed, it is essential that NATO retains its open door policy.

There should be no hint that NATO had allowed Russia's objections to enlargement to influence its policies

More generally, interviewees believed that NATO should, to a greater extent than present, be a forum for political discussion, consultation,

information sharing and consensus building on non-core security issues. One example is arms control, where Allies have an interest in ensuring that measures negotiated in other fora do not adversely affect its deterrence and defence posture. Some felt that the Alliance—as essentially the only forum that brings together the Euro-Atlantic community—is also an appropriate forum for the discussion of other less directly relevant issues such as sanctions, and thus advocated the broadening of NATO's political dimension.

2.5. Internal Challenges

Most interviewees in the four states were concerned about the quarrels inside NATO (but visible to the public) that they regard as being highly damaging to the Alliance. Furthermore, they noted that difficulties between Allies beyond the competence of the Alliance, such as trade disputes, disagreements over how to address diverse challenges such as climate change and Iran, and the rise of populism and associated decline in multilateralism exacerbate disagreements inside NATO itself.

There is little agreement on what the Alliance's overall goals should be, still less how to reach them

Most pointed to the lack of US leadership of the Alliance as a key problem. They believed that the Trump administration's antipathy towards NATO and key Allies such as Germany and France, and its aggressive agenda on burden sharing and growing demands for cooperation with its China policy clearly undermine the transatlantic relationship, even if practical support to the four states through the European Deterrence Initiative has been positive. While interviewees accepted that declining European power is a strategic problem for the US, and that latent anti-Americanism in, for example, Paris, Berlin and Rome contribute to the transatlantic quarrel, they regard with some regret the unwillingness of the US to see, even as its own power declines, the boost that a coherent and effective NATO would bring to its status and influence abroad. It would be nonsensical for the US to reduce the contributions it makes and the resources it brings to European security. At the same time, interviewees recognised that Europe's own poor record on defence expenditure and consequent lack of military capabilities—particularly those relevant to the upper end of the conflict spectrum—were also damaging to the transatlantic relationship.

Nonetheless, some argued, there is still a strong sense of transatlantic community. The idea of the West, as expressed through shared values, a shared global vision, democratic states and the rule of law is still a powerful bond. It is not too late to recover from the present circumstances if provocative public statements can be replaced by a process of honest, but discreet consultation.

However, interviewees said, NATO is not only suffering from a 'US versus the rest' problem. Political cohesion is poor across the board and can be expected to be further weakened by the Covid-19 crisis, which has seen Allies prioritise national rather than common interests. Threat perceptions differ between the north-eastern Allies and those to the west and south. What might be perceived as excessive policy demands, such as those from the Baltic states and Poland for more NATO presence, and the pursuit by some Allies of apparently short-term and/or parochial ends at the expense of long-term interests, can also be divisive. There is little agreement on what the Alliance's overall goals should be, still less how to reach them. Some interviewees felt that the French-led push for greater European Strategic Autonomy was also problematic for NATO, although others speculated that it might be a motivator for European capability development.

More fundamentally, some interviewees felt that the very values that bind NATO together are threatened, arguing that fractures in democracy and the rise of populism and authoritarianism in some member states challenge the very fabric of the Alliance. This is a particular concern given that it is common values more than—as was the case in the Cold War—common threats that are expected to hold NATO together in the current era.

Even if at the military level NATO is solid, it is above all a political alliance and at the political

level there is much anxiety and distrust. Interviewees suggested that a major contributor to this situation is the fact that NATO is not used enough as a forum for discussion of transatlantic security matters, even though it is the obvious place for such a discussion to take place. As a result, there is simply not enough consultation among the Allies on major strategic issues and internal disagreements are inevitable—in this sense at least, there is perhaps some truth in President Macron's diagnosis of the brain death of the Alliance.

2.6. A New Strategic Concept?

While interviewees in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland were not agreed on the need for a new strategic concept, most expressed caution.

Those who argued for revision noted that the security environment—and NATO itself—had changed considerably over the past ten years. The threat definition, the description of the Alliance's core tasks, the lack of reference to China, and the text on partnership with Russia were emphasised as being particularly outdated. Also, it was noted that the concept is out of step with the new military strategy, which was agreed in 2019. In short, the 2010 concept is a product of a different era and the sooner it is amended, the better. But even those who advocated change noted that any process to write a new concept would be difficult, and that there was a need to think carefully about timing.

Any process to write a new strategic concept would be difficult, and there is a need to think carefully about timing

Others argued that the 2010 strategic concept is dated, but not obsolete. The current reflection process, while it may be useful, was initiated largely to placate certain criticisms of the Alliance—notably those of President Macron—rather than because of a pressing need to address fundamental problems. In any case, NATO's strength lies in its power and cohesion, not in any finely crafted document.

Above all, however, those who cautioned against producing a new concept were concerned that the rifts between Allies that the process would expose—both in the drafting of the document and in its subsequent implementation—risked destroying Alliance unity. Interviewees were concerned that the domestic politics of populism, isolationism and nationalism evident in some member states are a poor foundation to build cohesion upon and that the crating of a new strategic concept is not so urgent that it cannot wait for more favourable circumstances. In this regard, interviewees expressed particular fears over the directions that the current US administration might try to compel NATO to take.

Conclusions and Recommendations

If NATO is a conservative organisation, then Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are amongst its most conservative members. In the first decade or so of their membership, NATO, reflecting the strategic circumstances at the start of the millennium, focused on crisis management tasks beyond its borders requiring them to participate (willingly) in costly operations that had little direct impact on their own security. Today the four states are members of an Alliance that is focused on defence and deterrence, pays serious attention to the threat from Russia to their east, and demonstrates this through the permanent presence of combat forces on their territories. It is an Alliance that by and large upholds the core qualities they regard as fundamental to its effectiveness and endurance—including the pursuit of common interests, shared values, cohesion, the interdependency of security relationships, consensus-based decision making, and collective response. The four states are gratified to be members of the Alliance of 2020.

Nevertheless, while the Alliance may not be in crisis, it is not without its problems. By far the most challenging of these is the lack of internal cohesion, to which there are few obvious solutions. It is to be hoped that the Secretary General's reflection process, alongside the lessons that will emerge from NATO's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, will nudge the Allies towards rediscovering old habits of cooperation.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have yet to formalise positions on the NATO they would wish to emerge from the reflection process. Nonetheless, on the basis of the interviews we have conducted in the four states, we recommend that, if it is to reflect their interests, NATO should:

- recognise that Russia is the main threat to security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, and will remain so for the foreseeable future, requiring continued attention and a sustained, robust response from the Allies;
- maintain a 360-degree approach to identifying and dealing with threats, placing particular emphasis on the threat from terrorism to Europe's south. While there may be limits to what NATO can achieve in counter-terrorism, finding a balance between satisfying the security concerns of all Allies is an essential job for the Alliance;
- be cautious about expanding the remit of the Alliance to deal with the challenge of China. NATO certainly does not have the capacity to check China in the Asia-Pacific region, and to attempt to do so would risk undermining Alliance credibility and divert resources from more urgent tasks. However, NATO may have a part to play in countering Chinese espionage, disinformation, and investment in strategic infrastructure, all of which may have a negative impact on the cohesion of the Alliance;
- retain the three core tasks set out in the 2010 strategic concept—collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Of these, collective defence should be the priority as this is the principal means to respond to the threat from Russia, and the task that most closely binds the Allies together;
- re-calibrate the task of crisis management to ensure that it better reflects the need for collective support to the civilian authorities in large-scale efforts to deal with crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, on Alliance territory (not least because the Alliance's ability to demonstrate its relevance here will be important when it comes to maintaining the position of defence in the allocation of public finances);
- invest in means to counter challenges in non-traditional operational domains, in particular cyber and information, while recognising that other organisations have (often leading) roles in these domains too. NATO must be selective and ready to cooperate with others. In particular it should pursue cooperation and synergy with the EU;
- sustain higher levels of defence spending and focus capability development to ensure that the Alliance can effectively deter and defend against Russia, but also have options for dealing with other threats;
- continue to develop partnerships beyond the Alliance, with a focus on states in the vicinity of NATO territory;
- maintain its open door policy, even if the candidate countries are not yet ready to join; and
- enhance its role as a forum for discussion of transatlantic security matters, both because NATO is the organisation that most obviously represents the West, and as a means of confronting the lack of cohesion among the member states.

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