

BRIEF

STRENGTHENING NATO'S
COHESION THROUGH
CONSULTATION

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NATO has been able to adapt to profound changes in international relations largely due to its consultation mechanisms. During the Cold War, consultation enabled NATO to adjust its strategy to the Allies' changing perceptions of the threat posed by the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, consultations facilitated NATO's adjustment to new threats that required out-of-area interventions and engagement in the fight against terrorism. Today, the Alliance is again trying to adjust to a new reality. With US policy in NATO likely to be determined by the rise of China, the Allies will have to consult to come up with a coherent approach to reconcile US global and European regional security interests.

NATO was created as a collective defence organisation soon after World War II to counterbalance the power of the Soviet Union. The Alliance's military credibility was guaranteed by the economic, political and military potential of the US and supported by American military presence in Europe. In case of military attack, the Allies could invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty to trigger a collective military response. The credibility of this mutual security guarantee

level of permanent representatives (ambassadors) and regularly at higher political levels (foreign ministers, ministers of defence and heads of state and government). Over the years, NATO has developed habits, norms and institutional mechanisms that enable almost continuous consultations on the whole range of issues affecting their security. These have facilitated the development of a common strategy and necessary capabilities to support it, and limited tensions among member states with sometimes differing national interests, strengthening the Alliance's political cohesion. As NATO decisions are made by consensus, the consultation agenda also has to be approved by all Allies. Informal discussion among various groups of states and the weekly informal lunch of all representatives can help to build a consensus on what should be discussed during formal meetings, perhaps leading to politically binding decisions

THE COLD WAR ERA

The 1956 report of three ministers (the 'Three Wise Men') offered clear practical suggestions for consultation, stating that it "means discussion of problems collectively, in the early stages of policy formation, and before national positions become fixed."² The report significantly influenced the development of NATO's consultation norms. It made clear that consultations are not about informing other Allies about decisions that have already been taken, but entail frank discussion and the possibility of influencing national choices that affect mutual security.³

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has been strengthened by consultation mechanisms. Article 4 of the Washington Treaty gives Allies the right to call for consultations if their "territorial integrity, political independence or security ... is threatened."¹ Rather than rely on ad hoc consultations during crisis, NATO created the North Atlantic Council—its main decision making body, which meets at least weekly at the

The strongest norms and most elaborate mechanisms have been developed regarding consultations on collective defence policy. Since this is a primary task of NATO, derived directly from the Washington Treaty, some experts claim that there might be a legal obligation to consult before a NATO member takes a definite action, which could undermine the common defence.⁴ There is no mechanism to enforce compliance and there are numerous examples of Allies bypassing consultation to take unilateral actions. Nevertheless, most Allies try to respect such a norm as it creates a similar obligation for the US, limiting the risk, for example, of the unexpected or uncoordinated withdrawal of US troops from Europe.

There is another important dimension of consultations concerning actions outside the Euro-Atlantic area—since this is not a ‘treaty area’ there is no apparent legal obligation to consult. Nevertheless, the European Allies expected the US to use consultations to inform them about plans that could affect NATO’s security. The US was also interested in such consultations, expecting that they would facilitate coordination of NATO policies in support of American foreign policy goals, but this rarely turned out to be the case. The 1967 Harmel report was an attempt to strengthen this dimension of consultation and thus NATO’s political cohesion, stating that “the North Atlantic Treaty Area cannot be treated in isolation from the rest of the world. Crises and conflicts arising outside the area may impair its security either directly or by affecting the global balance.”⁵

In 1974, NATO made another attempt to strengthen consultations adopting the Ottawa Declaration, which stressed that “the Allies are firmly resolved to keep each other fully informed and to strengthen the practice of frank and timely consultations by all means which may be appropriate on matters relating to their common interests as members of the Alliance, bearing in mind that these interests can be affected by events in other areas of the world.”⁶

Such declarations, however, did not solve the structural problems that discouraged states from consulting to coordinate common responses to crises outside the treaty area. Some states

blocked such consultations, believing that the Alliance should not deal with problems beyond its ‘treaty area’ and that discussions could lead to new commitments that would undermine collective defence and deterrence policy. Bigger states also wanted to preserve their privileged bilateral relations with the US, which often resulted in informal consultations in smaller formats. The US did not want to share sensitive information with all Allies without guarantees that this would result in coordinated action in support of US foreign policy goals.

POST-COLD WAR

After the end of the Cold War, it became obvious that NATO would have to adjust to the new strategic situation and new threats if it were to maintain its relevance and retain US interest. NATO began to augment Article 4 of the Washington Treaty as a mechanism to facilitate common out-of-area missions. The first post-Cold War NATO strategy, approved in 1991, stated that “Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, disruption of the flow of vital resources and actions of terrorism and sabotage,” and indicated that arrangements for

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consultation under Article 4 could lead to coordinated efforts in response to such risks.⁷ Similar wording was used in the 1999 strategic concept, while the 2010 concept additionally broadened NATO tasks to include crisis management.⁸ NATO thus developed norms and mechanisms (supported with capabilities) that could be used to respond to threats wherever they might arise. These could have been used after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the US had NATO not decided to invoke Article 5 instead. NATO subsequently offered significant support to the US, assumed the command of a mission in Afghanistan and consulted to limit the political tensions inherent in such a task. At the same time, informal consultations took place among a smaller group of states that contributed most to the fight against terrorism.

In recent years, NATO's mechanisms of consultation have proved lacking in defusing tensions and discouraging unilateral actions, both in the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond it.

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During Donald Trump's presidency, for example, the US withdrew troops from Syria, despite the possible impact on the security of the Allies. This unilateral decision encouraged Turkey to send troops to Syria, which could further complicate the fight with Islamic terrorist groups and increase the risk of confrontation between Turkey and Russia, which has a military presence in Syria. Also, despite NATO's presence in Afghanistan, the US pursued negotiations with the Taliban without providing NATO with an insight into its plans. And it only resorted to consultations in NATO on its decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty after the criticism from the Allies. Similarly, it first announced the decision to withdraw troops from Germany and only later consulted with Allies about how to limit the impact on NATO. Some of these decisions were publicly criticised by NATO members, most vocally by French president Emmanuel Macron who, before the 2019 NATO leaders meeting, accused the Alliance of being "brain dead" and took the opportunity to promote the idea of European 'strategic autonomy'.⁹

IMPROVING CONSULTATION

There are numerous reasons for tensions in NATO today. The Trump administration has taken a more unilateral approach to international relations and not seen NATO as an important tool. Divergent threat perceptions and the politically difficult process of NATO's adaptation to a new strategic situation has also played a part. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has viewed Russia as a potential threat, but some Allies have felt more threatened than others. NATO is strengthening its defence and deterrence potential but at the same time must maintain its crisis management capacity, and its usefulness for states who feel more threatened by terrorism and irregular

migration. Although the US perceives both China and Russia as rivals, there is a growing consensus that China poses a real strategic challenge to the US.¹⁰ US engagement in Europe is likely to be linked to the rise of China, which increases the risk of transatlantic tensions over global strategy and the division of labour between US and Europe in the treaty area.

Although Allies will always have some different interests, they can use consultations to limit their negative, political impact. They can also adjust consultation mechanisms to changing strategic realities, further limiting the risk of tensions and increasing the probability of a common, coordinated response. The Allies should thus agree a set of principles to guide their consultations in the coming decade. These might include:

- Consultations must not be merely notifications or briefings about decisions already taken. They must entail frank discussions and the chance to influence an Ally's actions.
- Consultations with Allies should always precede discussions with rivals.
- Allies must consult before they take any decision that could undermine the credibility of collective defence.
- When time permits, Allies should consult on actions out-of-area, which could affect NATO security.
- When Allies agree on common actions out-of-area, there must be full consultations on matters that may affect the common mission.

Allies can also take measures to influence their cost-benefit calculations regarding timely discussions of crucial issues. They should:

- Commit, in a highly visible political declaration, to observe agreed norms.
- Formally assess whether the norms of NATO consultations, which require frank discussion on matters affecting collective defence, have been violated. This will be necessary to restore confidence in the consultation mechanism in its most important dimension and to limit the risk of future unilateral actions.

- Create an incentive for consultations on issues that extend beyond collective defence. Even though support for out-of-area actions cannot be guaranteed, Allies could commit to not publicly criticise the actions of an Ally that has used the consultation mechanism.

Small- and medium-sized countries, including the Baltic states and Poland would be the biggest beneficiaries of enhanced consultations. It is in their clear interest to use consultation to strengthen NATO's political cohesion.

The Allies should also consider recasting their NATO+1 bilateral relations with partners from the Asia-Pacific region (Australia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand) as a new NATO+4 multilateral cooperation format, perhaps branded the NATO-Pacific Forum.¹¹ Regular consultations would provide Allies and partners

with better situational awareness about evolving threats from both China and Russia, facilitating a coordinated response in numerous areas, including cyber, space or arms control.

Some Allies might wish to promote a reset with Russia under the pretext of not pushing it into an alliance with China. This would not be in the interests of the Baltic states and Poland, as any reset would inevitably be at the expense of credible collective defence and deterrence in Europe. NATO+4 consultations would, in exploring the common strategic goals of China and Russia in undermining the rules-based international order, limit the risk that Allies would view a Russia reset as a simple answer to a complex problem, and facilitate a discussion on effective responses to the challenges posed by both Russia and China as part of a broader NATO strategy.

ENDNOTES

¹ NATO, "[The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949.](#)"

² NATO, "[Report of the Committee of Three on Non-Military Cooperation in NATO](#)," 13 December 1956, para 42.

³ T.J. Kennedy Jr, *NATO Politico-Military Consultation* (Washington D.C.: The National Defense University, 1984), 2.

⁴ See the discussion in, for example, F. L. Kirgis, "NATO Consultations as a Component of National Decisionmaking," *American Journal of International Relations* 73 (1979), 372-406.

⁵ NATO, "[The Future Tasks of the Alliance. Report of the Council - 'The Harmel Report'](#)," 13 December 1967, para 15.

⁶ NATO, "[Declaration on Atlantic Relations issued by the North Atlantic Council \('The Ottawa Declaration'\)](#)," 19 June 1974, para 11.

⁷ NATO, Public Diplomacy Division, *Towards the New Strategic Concept: A Selection of Background Documents* (Brussels: NATO, 2010), 23.

⁸ NATO, "[The Alliance's Strategic Concept Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C.](#)," 24 April 1999, para 24; NATO, "[Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, adopted by NATO Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon](#)," 19 November 2010, para 4.

⁹ "[Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead](#)," *The Economist*, 7 November 2017.

¹⁰ Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain. Defending America in Future High-Tech Warfare* (New York: Hachette, 2020), 94.

¹¹ W. Lorenz, "[NATO and the Rise of China: How a 'NATO-Pacific Forum' Could Augment Alliance Cohesion](#)," PISM Policy Paper, 17 April 2020.

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