



Gaining muscle, losing soul? **ZOMBIE NATO**

The cabinet nominations, budget proposals and stepped up force displays of the Trump administration signals a decisive militarization. Even if European NATO members also increase their military muscle, a transatlantic gap on the purpose, language and limits of military power seems looming – not least in the field of counter-terrorism.

The American push to make 'burdensharing' a key issue at the May 2017 mini-summit comes at a time of internal European distress. European members have all largely embraced that agenda, tempted to focus on the technical issues of how to get closer to the mandatory 2 percent of BNB. While technical debates

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Member state defense budgets are neither the root of, nor the solution to, current problems of NATO cooperation. The May 2017 meeting must address alliance survival in qualitative terms also.
- Member states must discuss not only the growing divide concerning security *where* (Russia, Africa, the Middle East?) but also security *how*: what kind of security logic can a 2017 NATO unite around?
- Prospects of a 'zombie NATO' must be discussed. A Trump US will be neither isolationist nor interventionist but decisively militarized. This will make consensus around joint alliance missions difficult, and eventually eat away at alliance identity.

NATO is a multi-national not a supra-national organization and as such, perpetual struggles over how to build member state consensus is part of its DNA. Yet the depth of NATO's current predicament runs deeper. In qualitative terms, the gulf between how a Trump Pentagon and a Germany-heavy Europe thinks about military power is wide. Unless NATO addresses that gulf – honestly and with grit – all talk of collective will or resolve is bound to be an illusion.

over spending will certainly build NATO muscle though, avoiding political questions about the use, implications and limits of such defense capabilities, risks weakening the will, pulse and soul of the transatlantic alliance.

American militarization

The combination of fewer entanglements, but more ready and spectacular displays of force made up a cornerstone of the Trump campaign. Three months into his presidency, the new White House has already done much to make good on the promise.

To begin with, the Trump administration has proposed – though not yet passed – what it calls a 'hard and not soft power' national budget, combining a 29 percent State Department cutback with an 11 percent defense and 7 percent Homeland Security increase. This increase will be hardware heavy, funding airpower and building nuclear capabilities.

Secondly, President Trump has put more generals on national security posts than has any previous administration since WWII. Both Secretary of Defense General Mattis and National Security Advisor General McMaster receive widespread praise for the breadth

and depth of their experience and understanding. Yet their outlook, toolbox and professional network remain – naturally - that of the military, why they too have filled their cabinets with an overweight of military profiles. At the same time, the filling of large swaths of positions across state department and US embassies has not been a priority why many of these remain empty – and some are expected to be closed down eventually.

Thirdly, the Trump administration has withdrawn from diplomatic and strategic engagement in both the Middle East and Africa, leaving loud and visual military statements such as the missile strike in response to Syrian President Assad's civilian chemical attack or the first-time use of the so-called 'Mother of All Bombs' in Afghanistan to do the talking. While these events do not amount to actual doctrine, they do suggest military might as a form of strategy in its own right. The Trump administration appears to view weaponry as stagecraft: its utility resides in its actual and performative demonstration. Whereas Obama subscribed to a military doctrine of 'light footprints', the Trump administration subscribes to 'shock-and-awe'.

Finally, and in extension of the above, the Trump administration has reversed Obamas top-down political control, leaving military decision-makers more of a free hand in US counter-terrorism operations: leeway that has most notably increased US activities in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. As a whole range of international observers report, the US has stepped up special operations, drone strikes and bombing activities across the conflict zones of the Middle East and Africa – a transformation that comes with higher civilian casualties and largely without consult of international partners or NATO allies.

European resignation

A Trump America, in short, views security through a military lens. At the NATO mini-summit in Bruxelles May 2017 – a summit which Trump himself is

FACT BOX

The Trump administration has named its first budget proposal both a 'national security' and a 'hard, not soft power' budget, proposing that:

- National defense expenses be **increased** by 11 percent
- Homeland Security expenses be **increased** by 7 percent
- USAID, diplomacy and State Department be **cut** by 29 percent.

The budget has not yet been passed and is likely to be significantly altered during negotiations.

expected to attend – the US is likely to ask European NATO-allies to step up their contributions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This has been a Trump demand of NATO throughout his campaign. It was also the main message when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spoke at the Munich Security Conference in February. A Trump US wants NATO to become more of a joint counter-terrorism player: not in the broader civil, development-oriented or stabilizing sense, but in a distinctively and narrowly military sense.

Is that a course which Europe can or will pursue? Can Europe – given the lessons of the past two decades of counter-terrorism operations and conflict management – go along with the Trumpian doctrine? Will the populations of Europe's NATO member countries accept the civilian casualties likely to flow from such commitment? And are the long-term implications of such a development ones that support European understandings of security, order and purpose? In the case of Germany, whose relevance to European defense corporation has become more important post-Brexit, the answer is simple: no. In a broader European NATO-perspective however, debates over

the implications of, and European answers to, a new American course are largely absent.

That silence is unsurprising. The trend towards a 'louder' and more narrowly military face of American security doctrine, reaches Europe at a time of internal distress. Not only is Europe struggling to fathom the (security) implications of a British Brexit – and to keep the departure of other EU members at bay. Still on the rebound from the deep-rooted disagreements over refugees in 2015, Europe is also wrestling with questions of how to link the challenge of migration with deeper issues of both security, stability and development in the Global South. Finally, European populations also seem increasingly disillusioned with the complex, difficult, expensive, error-ridden and often painful learning curves that comes with global involvement.

Against this backdrop, it is understandable if European NATO-members feel tempted to escape the difficult political discussions implicitly involved in the new American course, addressing instead the more technical and quantitative issue of 'burden-sharing'.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and President Donald Trump in Washington 12 April 2017 © NATO

Though understandable however, the question remains whether resignation from difficult debates over the nature, principles and tools of liberal order is wise. Is a strategy of pure adaptation good pragmatism? Or is it rather the road to Zombie NATO? Europe's focus on increasing defense budgets, while avoiding political questions about the use, implications and limits of such defense capabilities, may build NATO muscle. But will it not ultimately weaken the organizations will, pulse or soul?

Zombie NATO?

Naturally, a zombie NATO would still be around. But would it, in actual political terms, be alive and working? Three points are of pivotal importance:

Will. NATO is a multi-national not a supra-national organization and as such, perpetual struggles over how to build member state consensus is part of its DNA. Yet the depth of NATO's current predicament runs deeper. In qualitative terms, the gulf between how a Trump Pentagon and a Germany-heavy Europe thinks about military power is wide. Unless NATO addresses that gulf – honestly and with grit – all talk of collective will or resolve is bound to be an illusion.

Pulse. NATO, as any collective organization, needs fuel or pulse: the drive that comes with a shared sense of purpose. Turning NATO into little more than a cost-benefit transactional institution – ignorant of the UN values that its preamble pays tribute to, and based on little but quid-pro-quo deals around common interests or enemies – installs a dangerous logic. An alliance held together by nothing but mutual foes makes crisis its only dynamic. That is a dangerous fuel.

Soul. A product of the second world war, NATO was born not only as a shield against external foes, but against the destructive potential that is state power as such: a means of taming nationalist or geopolitical forces. In the turmoil of contemporary events, sanitized and more celebratory narratives of the transatlantic experience – of a West so committed to peace and prosperity that institutional restraints on its own national powers are no longer needed – may be tempting. The question is though, whether the very soul of NATO identity does not depend upon that historical memory of trauma. If so, will it survive making performative militarism NATO's key uniting doctrine?

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Cover photo: Italy - Sigonella - US Navy pilot heads out into night for patrol. © Richard Baker

