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Introduction

Following a highly contentious summit in Brussels earlier this year it appears that NATO is once again undergoing a crisis in intra-Alliance relations, threatening not only its effectiveness in upholding the transatlantic security architecture, but also the existence of the Alliance itself. The key term is 'once again'. Since its conception, NATO has time and time again been predicted to crumble under the pressure of exogenous crises or tensions among Allies. As Thies argues, NATO has conventionally been presented by commentators as "perpetually on the brink of collapse"[1]. Current discussions surrounding the role of NATO in the international system are likely to be placed within that narrative. From the rise of a resurgent Russia in the East and the emergence of hybrid and transnational threats in the South, to a substantial revamping of the dynamic of transatlantic relations by the Trump Administration, a number of factors are contributing to a highly contentious environment within which NATO finds itself today. This essay will look at a number of issues which define the contemporary security order and NATO's role within this 'new international system in the making'. It seeks to build up on a historical perspective of NATO's evolution and adaptation in order to comprehensively assess NATO's role in the contemporary political and security order. It will be argued that based on the continued disagreements over NATO's priorities and responsibilities, enhancing the Alliance's credibility hinges on projecting commitment to sustainable solutions based on fostering resilience against security threats within NATO's territory as well as outside of it, in cooperation with various local and regional stakeholders.

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[1] Thies, Wallace J. 2009. *Why NATO Endures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 1.

NATO who, NATO what?

At its core, a question about NATO's role within the contemporary international system requires us to spell out what we mean by such a system, and what we mean by 'NATO's role' within it. In the 21st century we frequently hear about shifts in the global balance of power, a crisis of the international liberal order, and NATO's necessity to adapt to these changes. The essence of all these is a dynamic of transformation. But what exactly is changing? It is firstly the dynamics among the key actors in the international system; secondly, our definition of who those actors are; and lastly, the nature of their interaction. The transformation of the contemporary international system thus first and foremost revolves around a changing distribution of global power, signified by the rise of so-called emerging powers, as well as ongoing developments in trans-atlantic and intra-European relations themselves. The changing roles of Russia and the United States in global affairs are particularly pertinent with regards to NATO in this context. Secondly, NATO today does not solely face threats emanating from hostile and revisionist state actors, but transnational and subnational groups, hybrid movements, and agency-less phenomena such as climate change, redefining the kinds of actors the Alliance has to face or engage with. Lastly, many would argue that the norms and practices of international interaction established in the post-World War II period of institution-building are shifting as well, reflecting the hybridization of global power structures and incorporation of a multitude of actors with varying value systems in existing and newly established regional and international institutions. As an Alliance "founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law"[2], all of which are fundamentally liberal norms and values, NATO is inevitably influenced by normative transformations within the global context.

In the sphere of international peace and security, such developments contribute to the emergence of hybridized threats and highly contested strategic environments. NATO's role in facing such threats and navigating such environments has been multifaceted. Reflecting the historically shifting conceptions of the Alliance's core identity and its collectively defined agenda, NATO has demonstrated an ability to adapt to evolving threats and challenges while continuing to suffer, many would say, by the very same principle. An increasing number of roles corresponds to an increasing number of responsibilities all appearing equally pertinent, making prioritization and effectiveness across the board an ever challenging endeavour.

Throughout its history, NATO has balanced among and shifted between numerous responsibilities based on the nature of a given security environment and the corresponding threat perceptions of individual Allies. The end of the Cold War signified the transition from an almost exclusive focus on collective territorial defense and deterrence against the Soviet threat, to an

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[2] The North Atlantic Treaty, Preamble.

increasing engagement in out-of-area operations and crisis management, as well as the building of a global network of strategic partnerships. In part reflecting the strategic environment and in part representing the collective priorities set by NATO's Allies, both the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods allowed for a dominant focus on either collective defense or expeditionary security management tasks. NATO does not have that luxury today. As Michta and Hilde state, "today the alliance contains three NATO's defined by the relative power, threat perceptions, and preferences of the Member States" - with the American focus on a global NATO "capable of delivering security where needed", the Western European impetus on a regional alliance and a normative commitment to a 'liberal democratic club', and 'quid pro quo' allies primarily concerned with collective defense and security guarantees while maintaining support for global Allied expeditionary undertakings[3]. NATO's role in the contemporary international system is not defined solely by collective defense against a concrete threat, but a multitude of security challenges which require an equal amount of consideration for the Eastern and the Southern flanks, as well as the broader global security dynamics.

Still, as stated by Julian Lindley-French, there is "clearly much contention over the future direction and nature of NATO"[4]. But several common points can be made. The first is that continued and continuous adaptation has been established as a critical must. In the contemporary security environment, new and unconventional threats emerge at times unpredictably, making not only the current process of adaptation but the *readiness* to adapt a fundamental necessity for the maintenance of a stable and secure Euro-Atlantic area. The second, reiterating the 'three NATOs' classification, is that this adaptation revolves around a lack of consensus concerning its supposed direction. Contrasting threat perceptions combined with established differences in strategic cultures continue to define the Allies' agendas and their clashing conceptions of *what* NATO ought to do next and *how*. The 'in-area/out-of-area' dilemma clearly prevails next to many others despite efforts to conceptually balance among regional and global priorities in the 2010 Strategic Concept.

In order to successfully adapt and maintain an ability to adapt to a perpetually transforming security environment and an evolving international system however, it seems that NATO should be able to construct a coherent formulation regarding its role and responsibilities reflecting all Allied concerns, while forging stronger inter-Allied solidarity. The GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative report echoes that "the global aim of adaptation must lead to the generation of a new One Alliance Concept for NATO: One Alliance in which the security and defence of each member is again the

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[3] Michta, Andrew A., and Paal Sigurd Hilde. 2014. *The Future of NATO: Regional Defense and Global Security*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

[4] Lindley-French, Julian. 2017. "The Future Of NATO". *NATO Defense College Foundation*. http://www.natofoundation.org/food/the-future-of-nato-julian-lindley-french/.

security and defence of all [original spelling]"[5]. 'Back to basics' in this case connotes a the necessity to restore the emphasis on the fundamental task of NATO as a collective defense alliance as a prerequisite for effectiveness in maintaining security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Existing approaches such as the '360-degree alliance' concept represent a recognition that a coherent so-to-say 'unified in diversity of interests' narrative is necessary in guiding the process of adaptation and the future evolution of NATO's roles and responsibilities. Conventional narratives indicate that it is precisely the ability to adapt and the ability to absorb various tasks which defines the successful survival of NATO as a relevant institution in the post-Cold War era[6]. In conceptual 'IR slang', purposive action requires the restoration of ontological security within a given institution, a clear definition and realization of its identity and responsibility within a given environment[7]. An issue with restoring the 'one for all and all for one' logic as the central pillar of Allied responsibility is its traditional connotation to the logic that 'all', as in the Alliance, need to be able to muster a collective response to an attack on one of its members. In today's security environment a traditional terrestrial military attack on a country remains a possibility. However, it is a wider spectrum of conventional and hybrid, transnational and multidimensional threats which breeds into the complexity of today's global political and security dynamics. From environmental challenges to cyber warfare, from irregular migration to disinformation campaigns, 'one for all and all for one' in the traditional sense of collective defense ought to be complemented with a commitment to collective security in a broader sense. The ultimate dilemma in this new international system is therefore not only in-area/out-of-area, but between prevention and projection of stability, and readiness to respond in different issue areas and geographical locations.

We are thus looking at an Alliance which serves multiple roles and purposes, while retaining a coherent identity as a hub for transatlantic approaches, norms, and values. Translating such a message into coherent policy frameworks and strategies has however proven more challenging, particularly as intra-Allied solidarity is jeopardized by political antagonism.

While all NATO members supposedly share a collective commitment to Western liberal norms and values, and NATO has previously been successful in building its collective ethos based on such[8], translating normative commitments to successful strategies and policy frameworks has

[5] Lindley-French, Julian. 2017. "GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative: One Alliance - The Future Tasks Of The Adapted Alliance". GLOBSEC.

[6] See e.g. Barany, Zoltan, and Robert Rauchhaus. 2011. "Explaining NATO's Resilience: Is International Relations Theory Useful?". *Contemporary Security Policy* 32 (2): 286-307. doi:10.1080/13523260.2011.590355. Orfy, Mohammed Moustafa. 2007. *The New NATO: Its Survival And Resilience*. Central Milton Keynes [England]: AuthorHouse.

[7] Cupać, Jelena. 2012. "Ontological Security Of International Organizations: NATO's Post-Cold War Identity Crisis And "Out-Of-Area" Interventions". *Синтезис - Часопис За Хуманистичке Науке И Друштвену Стварност,* no. 1: 19-43.

[8] Behnke, Andreas. 2012. *NATO's Security Discourse after the Cold War: Representing the West.* Abingdon: Routledge.

increasingly been subject to two impeding dynamics. The first is the tension between some Allies' interests (in particular regional interests in both the East and the South) and the normative message underpinning NATO's historic legitimacy. The Trump Administration's preference for protectionist trade policies for instance can only be seen as contradictory to the Western liberal free trade agenda. Even if trade appears to be detached from NATO's sphere of activities, its counter-piracy operations have been based on a normative message stipulating the essence of maritime security to the maintenance of global free trade and a rules-based global order. The second issue is the perceived challenge posed to Western liberal norms from emerging powers including Russia and China within the international arena. This challenge particularly plays out in connection to military (as well as humanitarian) interventions and the use of force for the protection of civilians against seemingly legitimate governments. NATO's 2012 intervention in Libya, while hailed as a 'model humanitarian intervention' by some, was staunchly opposed and criticized by major powers including Russia and China[9]. Building on its criticism of Western military interventions, Russia and China have gradually sought to increase their engagement in the MENA region and beyond as alternative "less principled and more transaction-oriented" partners to regional actors[10], including in conflict zones of key strategic interest to NATO such as Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan[11].

Both issues have major strategic implications for NATO and its ability to project credibility towards Allies and partners alike. Firstly, even as the political adaptation of the Alliance advances, NATO has to be aware that it does not operate in a political vacuum. NATO's engagements on both the Eastern and Southern Flanks are perceived by local, regional, and external actors within the context of geopolitical realities on the ground, and NATO has to be able to understand such realities in order to remain its relevance as well as to avoid potential conflict with external actors. Constructive engagement with local actors is absolutely key in this regard. Secondly, even as NATO cannot engage in every issue across the full spectrum of conceivable security threats, it has to demonstrate an acknowledgement of the full spectrum of local security issues, and design strategies within the framework of wider efforts in cooperation with external stakeholders. The following section will elaborate on some of the principles which should be underpinning future efforts to strengthen NATO's role and presence within the global security architecture.

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[9] Kuperman, Alan J. 2013. "A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign". *International Security* 38 (1): 105-136. doi:10.1162/isec_a_00126.
[10] Cristiani, Dario, Kacper Rekawek, and Habib Sayah. 2017. "Of Concerns And Image: The Alliance And Its Southern Flank". GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative Supporting Paper. Page 3. .
[11] Lavi, Galia and Sarah Fainberg. "Russia and China in the Middle East: Rapprochement and Rivalry", Strategic Assessment 20, no.4 (2018)

A credible commitment to sustainable peace and security

Based on the analysis of NATO's role in the contemporary international system presented above, the following section will argue that NATO should increase its focus on three particular interconnected concepts - credibility, resilience, and sustainability - to mitigate the appearance of Allied disunity and disconnect between interests and values. An increased focus on all three concept builds upon an enhanced awareness of local dynamics and conditions in key regions of concern and interest to NATO, in- and outside of its defined territory, an increased level of engagement, as well as incorporation of local ownership. Jointly the concepts should be seen as commonalities in efforts to enhance Alliance effectiveness across all of its core tasks identified in the Strategic Concept: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security.

The twin issues of prevention and readiness to respond discussed above are both fundamentally connected to fostering resilience, albeit in different ways. While resilience can be considered the product or aim of prevention efforts, successful response is built upon the assumption of resilience. This is equally relevant for the East and the South. In the East, supporting measures to strengthen state and societal resilience against hybrid threats contributes to the overall ability of the Alliance and its partners to defend safeguard social structures and critical infrastructure against continued Russian efforts to destabilize the region. In the event of a military attack, resilient infrastructure and communication networks as well as societies would be essential in mustering an effective response. In the South, resilience can be considered within the context of preventing major destabilization emanating from terrorist attacks and violent extremism, weak state structures, as well as irregular migration and human trafficking.

The fact that the benefits arising from investment in resilience-building measures and strengthening local ownership greatly outweigh the potential costs of response measures in the event of a crisis is commonly acknowledged. Alexander Vershbow for instance argues that "bolstering neighbours' ability to provide for their own security can reduce the need for more costly military interventions down the road"[12]. Large-scale interventions are not only more costly, but also threaten to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of NATO, particularly among partners and regional actors in the MENA region. Examination of the perceptions of NATO in the Southern neighborhood demonstrates that Western interventions, as well as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the operation in Libya, and the Trump Administration's policies in the region greatly undermine the perceived legitimacy of NATO strategies and partners' confidence in the Euro-Atlantic community. The perception is further that the above-mentioned events helped create a power vacuum in the

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[12] Vershbow, Alexander. 2017. "The political adaptation of the Alliance", page 73 in: Lindley-French, Julian. 2017. "GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative: One Alliance - The Future Tasks Of The Adapted Alliance". GLOBSEC.

MENA region which provides opportunities and incentives for non-state actors as well as emerging powers such as Russia and China, contributing to complex transformations in local and regional security dynamics. The costs associated with such interventions are thus not only material but also credibility- and reputation-related. As Russia and China seek to establish themselves as normative counter-weights to Western and particularly US interventionism, stipulating the primacy of non-intervention in domestic affairs under international law, greater commitment to bottom-up initiatives to foster regional security are essential.

While we can recognize the cost-effectiveness of resilience-building measures, future initiatives and engagements with partners should not be based on a transactional logic conditioning the support for resilience- and capacity-building solely on the basis of NATO's own interests. NATO should be able to recognize the particularly needs and interests of its Allies and partners not on the basis of cost-and-benefit analyses but on the basis of principle, and tailor support mechanisms and initiatives accordingly. Recognizing the (intended and unintended) consequences of previous policies and strategies is a first step in strengthening engagement with local and regional stakeholders which will be essential to sustainable strategies. Both previous concepts highlighted in this essay, credibility and resilience, also crucially depend on the ability of NATO to generate long-term commitment for sustainable peace-, state-, and capacity-building initiatives. Capacity-building has traditionally been one of the central pillars of NATO's cooperative security agenda, although lack of credibility persists as regional and local actors question the nature of NATO's interests and the durability of its commitment to regional peace and security[13]. Principles of local ownership and policy differentiation based on local dynamics should be the guiding concepts in such endeavours, further mitigating credibility issues.

Existing research does not present a highly favorable picture when it comes to NATO's ability to devise initiatives for sustainable peace and security, particularly within the context of out-of-area engagements[14]. In part based on NATO's ever shifting roles and priorities, generating and projecting long-term commitment to fostering bottom-up security and resilience through sustainable initiatives has proved challenging. The recent increase in commitment towards training missions and capacity-building initiatives is certainly a good step in the direction of fostering a resilient and

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[13] Cristiani, Dario, Kacper Rekawek, and Habib Sayah. 2017. "Of Concerns And Image: The Alliance And Its Southern Flank". GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative Supporting Paper. Gürcan, Metin. 2018. "NATO's Relevancy In The Southern Flank: Myth Or Reality? [sic]". In *Hub Or Spoke? NATO's Role In The Allied Projecting Stability Efforts On The Southern Flank*. Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center.
[14] Gheciu, A. (2011). Divided Partners: The Challenges of NATO-NGO Cooperation in Peacebuilding Operations. *Global Governance*, 17(1), pp.95-113. Gheciu, A. and Paris, R. (2011). NATO and the Challenge of Sustainable Peacebuilding. *Global Governance*, 17(1), pp.75-79. Menon, Anand, and Jennifer Welsh. 2011. "Understanding NATO's Sustainability: The Limits Of Institutionalist Theory". *Global Governance: A Review Of Multilateralism And International Organizations: January-March 2011* 17 (1): 81-94.

sustainably peaceful environment in the wider Euro-Atlantic area, but as has been argued above several challenges prevail.

A pledge to sustainability and projection of commitment are in essence two sides of the same coin on both NATO flanks. The extent of Allied commitment to the East has been a crucial issue for the Alliance in recent years, and projecting commitment is absolutely fundamental as NATO seeks to adopt further reassurance measures. In this sense, it is as valid as ever to say that 'if NATO cannot protect, it cannot project'[15]. As many existing analyses point out, there is much room for improvement regarding NATO's readiness and reassurance measures towards the Eastern Allies[16], and it is beyond the scope of this essay to reflect on all the possible additions to existing political and military strategies. In the aftermath of the Brussels Summit, it appears that effective and coherent strategic communications are however more crucial than ever. President Trump's rhetoric widely dominated news coverage of the Summit, seemingly placing in doubt US commitments towards the Alliance in general and towards collective defense in the case of a Russian attack on NATO Allies in particular. Beyond this rhetoric however, the US appears to have strengthened its engagement in the region starting in the second half of the Obama Administration and continuing under President Trump, including through more robust air defense initiatives in the Baltic region[17]. Together with 'softer' mechanisms made available through formal NATO channels, the US also provides the majority of the 'harder' tools in bilateral interaction with Georgia, in preparation for Georgia's eventual NATO membership which is staunchly opposed by Russia[18]. NATO should therefore first and foremost attempt to mitigate potentially undermining rhetoric through coherent strategic communications strategies vis a vis audiences within and outside the immediate scope of the Alliance, providing enhanced visibility to messages stipulating Allied commitment.

During the recent Brussels Summit, NATO reiterated its commitment to resilience-building measures against hybrid threats on the Eastern flank, as well as support for Ukraine's activities in countering hybrid warfare through the newly established NATO-Ukraine Platform[19]. However, as Kabanenko points out, existing pledges exist "without a clear organizational structure or working plan"[20]. Much therefore remains to be done to institutionalise NATO's commitment to countering

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[15] Yost, David S. 2010. "NATO's Evolving Purposes And The Next Strategic Concept". *International Affairs* 86 (2): 489-522. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00893.x.
[16] See e.g. Schaub Jr., Gary, Martin Murphy, and Frank G. Hoffman. 2018. "Hybrid Maritime Warfare: Building Baltic Resilience". *The RUSI Journal* 162 (1): 32-40.
[17] Kochis, Daniel, and Luke Coffey. 2018. "Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Bolstering The Defense Of The Baltic States". *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* No. 4882. https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/IB4882_0.pdf.
[18] Socor, Vladimir. 2018. "Georgia Plans Its 'To Do' Agenda For NATO". *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 150 (2). https://jamestown.org/program/georgia-plans-its-to-do-agenda-for-nato/.
[19] NATO Brussels Summit Declaration, Paragraph 66. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm#23
[20] Kabanenko, Ihor. 2018. "NATO Brussels Summit: Key Outcomes And Implications For Ukrainian Interests". *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15 (107).

hybrid warfare in its neighborhood. There is no doubt that in combination with conventional security challenges, destabilization resulting from Russian hybrid warfare across various sectors could be devastating for NATO. In essence, this represents a litmus test for the Alliance's ability to adapt not just to new geopolitical realities but to new modes of warfare. As has been mentioned previously, such efforts crucially need to be designed within the context of local and regional geopolitical realities. Every step of the way, NATO needs to be aware of Russia's broader efforts "to project and strengthen its influence in the region by fostering division, disputes and active local hostilities"[21]. The same counts for the Southern flank. Even as NATO remains less engaged in the geopolitical side of regional relations, it needs to be aware of the windows and opportunities presented to external actors, and the possible ways in which such actors impact the regional security dynamics.

Conclusion and further food for thought

There are several issues of utmost relevance to discussions about NATO's role in the contemporary international system which go beyond the scope of this essay. NATO faces numerous challenges with regards to its enlargement and partnership instruments, technological innovation, and adaptation to new non-territorial issues such as cyberthreats and political populism within Allied societies. The basis for NATO's relations with Russia will undoubtedly need to undergo substantial reconsideration before it will be able to find a sustainable solution for a stable Eastern neighborhood. This essay has attempted to highlight only some of the issues emanating for NATO's continued relevance from a number of transformations in the contemporary international system. Even as the Alliance struggles to bolster its political ethos and its normative identity is questioned by emerging powers in an increasingly diverse global order, NATO needs to remain aware of global power dynamics and how it is perceived by various local, regional, and global actors. The three concepts highlighted in this essay - credibility, resilience, and sustainability - could serve as a basis for efforts to enhance NATO's role across all of its key areas of responsibility. Ultimately, the Alliance finds itself in a historical unprecedented period, facing multiple highly diverse threats and being demanded to fulfill multiple highly diverse responsibilities. Only a highly committed and engaged NATO will be able to stand up to the challenge.

https://jamestown.org/program/nato-brussels-summit-key-outcomes-and-implications-for-ukrainian-interests/.

[21] Allen, John R, and Stefano Stefanini, 2017. "Comprehensive NATO", page 87 in: Lindley-French, Julian. 2017. "GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative: One Alliance - The Future Tasks Of The Adapted Alliance". GLOBSEC.