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The NATO Summit in Warsaw

Seven messages to expect

by Karl-Heinz Kamp

Heads of State and Government will meet in Warsaw this July for what will be the second NATO Summit since Russia resumed its imperial behaviour of the Cold War era. At the Wales Summit in 2014, it was not yet clear which direction Moscow would take, but today there is no doubt: Russia has left the European security order that was established after the Cold War and terminated its partnership with NATO. The Warsaw Summit is likely to respond to this turning point with seven key messages, some of which will only be credible if the Alliance steps up its efforts and continues to present a united front.

NATO Summit meetings tend to signal when it is time for the North Atlantic Alliance to adapt to changes in the political and military landscape. Although the term “historic” is used to describe almost every NATO Summit, few such meetings are pivotal in a truly historic sense. The Wales Summit in September 2014 was one such turning point, and the Alliance responded accordingly, agreeing a series of far-reaching measures to strengthen its deterrence and defence capability. However, after the Summit, sceptics complained that the West appeared weak in the face of Russia’s geopolitical ambitions. The Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* dismissed the outcomes of Wales as “pure window dressing”, while the *Washington Post* saw them as evidence of “fractured decision making” within the Alliance. *Forbes* magazine described Germany’s Russia-friendly stance as the reason for an alleged submission to Putin’s ambitions for power.

In fact, none of these assessments were accurate. Both NATO and the EU have shown themselves to be very much united with regard to Russia. Clearly, the Russian leadership has greatly underestimated both the “decadent” West in its ability to take action, and Germany in its level of resolve within both institutions. NATO will present a united front in Warsaw and can be expected to highlight its own role as a central security institution by sending seven key messages. In some of these messages there are pitfalls that must be avoided, and it is up to NATO to prove that the signals it sends are reliable.

1. NATO has adapted to the new global security environment

Some may complain that NATO largely ignored signs of a fundamental shift in Russian policy – such as Putin’s speech in Munich in 2007, or the buildup of Russia’s military capabilities after its war with Georgia in 2008. But it is now accepted throughout the Alliance that, in terms of security policy, the world is now back on an “Article 5” footing. This applies to defence, the deterrence of hostile forces, and the provision of assurance to allies; and this is no longer merely a notional concept, but a very real core NATO task that must be backed up militarily. The Warsaw Summit, therefore, will not only focus on the buildup of military capabilities in Eastern Europe as decided in Wales. It will also address key political questions, such as NATO expansion or partnerships with non-member countries, which are viewed differently in an Article 5 world. NATO is no longer mainly a crisis manager and an agency of political transformation, as it has been in the

past, but an instrument of national and collective defence. This means that for the time being, countries will only be able to join the Alliance if the Alliance is able to defend them. It is therefore unlikely that Ukraine, for example, will become a member of NATO in the foreseeable future.

2. NATO has avoided an East–South divide

In view of threats from two separate sources – Russia in the East and Islamist violence in the South (the Middle East and North Africa) – some observers had predicted a permanent conflict of priorities within the Alliance. Indeed, there have been disputes between Eastern, Southern and Southeastern European countries over NATO’s direction of effort, tasks, and resources; but such arguments have not led to paralysis or a sustained inability to take action. NATO’s rapid agreement over the Aegean operation in response to the migrant crisis and its support for Jordan (and indirectly Iraq) sent positive signals towards the South; although the next Summit will focus mainly on Eastern Europe.

However, the problem of conflicting threat perceptions will also remain after Warsaw. Despite having some characteristics of hybrid war, the threat in Eastern Europe is essentially a linear one which can be responded to in a linear fashion. This can be conveyed in terms of a linear narrative, according to which a threat requires specific countermeasures. The Southern member states, on the other hand, find it much more difficult to communicate to other NATO countries the nature of the threat they are facing. Failed states and religious violence are not linear phenomena to which a military alliance can directly respond. The balance between East and South will require constant and increasing attention, with countries such as Italy urging Eastern Europeans to support them on the issue of refugees, as a prerequisite for NATO-wide support in facing the threat from Russia.

3. US commitment to Europe remains strong and clear

Since 2012, there have been predictions that America would turn its back on Europe as a result of its “pivot” to Asia. Instead, Washington has shown remarkable speed and commitment in fulfilling its obligations to its NATO allies. It has currently provided USD 3.4 billion in funding for the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), taken command of two of the four battalions to be stationed in Eastern Europe, and deployed a third US combat brigade to Europe. These contributions have exceeded many European allies’ expectations. The deployments have also calmed the dispute within the Alliance over whether NATO troops in Eastern Europe will be there on a “permanent” or “persistent” (rotational) basis: a sufficient deterrent will now be ensured by a significant presence of NATO troops (especially US troops) in Eastern Europe at all times.

However, these commitments are potentially threatened by the rise of anti-establishment political movements on both sides of the Atlantic. The Alternative for Germany (AFD) and the French National Front (FN) flatly reject the idea of transatlantic security relations, and in doing so align themselves with Russian propaganda which warns of the supposed risks of US dominance. At the same time, the rise of US presidential candidate Donald Trump has brought forth a movement which is as vehemently against transatlantic solidarity as it is against NATO itself. Even if Trump should lose the presidential election, it is clear that much work will be required on both sides to ensure that transatlantic relations remain intact. The further one moves geographically from NATO’s Eastern flank, the more effort will be required to reverse declining public support for close European–American ties in the Alliance.

4. Europe is also providing more resources

The trend of steadily shrinking defence budgets has been halted, and even reversed in many NATO countries. In Germany, too, there is now far greater acceptance of higher spending on security; in fact Germany is probably the only NATO member whose finance minister has encouraged higher defence

spending. Despite this, Germany faces criticism because it still falls well short of the NATO target to spend two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence. Currently, the percentage of GDP spent on defence in Germany is 1.19 percent, and the figure is likely to fall to 1.17 percent as a result of the country's rapidly growing GDP. Some partners in the Alliance – particularly the United States – have repeatedly pointed to the relative strength of the German economy and the fact that the German government reaffirmed its commitment to the two percent target at the last NATO Summit in Wales.

Germany and other countries, for their part, point out that the two percent target is a poor indicator of what individual countries are actually able to contribute in military terms. The fact that Greece is one of the few NATO members to have met the target speaks volumes. Nevertheless, members who are well below the agreed target will continue to be criticised. A preferable and more realistic long-term target from Germany's point of view would be approximately 1.5 percent. But even this would require considerable additional funding and would only be possible if current growth continues steadily over an extended period. The investment of EUR 130 billion over a 15 year period, as requested by the defence minister, is therefore a fairly realistic figure.

5. NATO remains capable of political action

The criticism (mentioned in the introduction) of “fractured decision making” within the Alliance, and of the supposed inability of its 28 members to reach a consensus, has proven to be unjustified. NATO has continued to present a united front towards Russia and has repeatedly shown that it is capable of taking action.

- The decision to take part in the Aegean operation was implemented by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander just 32 hours after initial talks between Germany and Turkey.
- The processes necessary to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty can be completed within eight to twelve hours.
- Sweden and Finland are closely involved in NATO processes.
- If an agreement over the Cyprus dispute could be reached for the first time, it would considerably improve the chances of cooperation between NATO and the EU – for instance with regard to hybrid warfare or the resilience of states.

The message that NATO is capable of political action is therefore unequivocal.

6. The Alliance is a strong and resolute military force

The United States is not the only country to have significantly stepped up its presence in Eastern Europe. Other members are also playing their part to improve deterrence and defence capabilities. The Framework Nation concept, introduced by Germany, has successfully combined the military capabilities of individual countries into effective combat formations. The Enhanced Persistent Presence measures decided by the German Ministry of Defence in February 2016 ensure that armed forces from several NATO countries – and especially from the United States – are deployed in Eastern Europe at all times. This serves as a considerable deterrent, since a potential aggressor would always be confronted with the armed forces of several member countries. The threat of a military response from the Alliance substantially increases the risk of escalation and dramatically alters the aggressor's cost-benefit calculation.

However, the measures taken so far are nowhere near sufficient. A recent simulation of an act of aggression against Alliance territory showed that the Alliance made quick political decisions, but that its military capabilities were no match for the armed forces built up by the assumed opponent. The exercise was a very sobering experience for those involved. Furthermore, the deterrent provided by NATO troops stationed in Eastern Europe will only be credible if the Alliance can convince observers of its ability to bring adequate

reinforcements to the region in the event of a conflict. This is a key weakness of the Alliance, which has reduced its former transport and deployment capabilities to almost zero in recent decades. Germany has a special role to play here, as its geographical position is key to the efficient deployment of reinforcements.

7. NATO will keep open its offer to cooperate with Russia

The precedent of the Iran deal suggests that it should be both possible and useful to cooperate with Russia on certain issues. Indeed, it is a necessary means of avoiding unwanted escalation on both sides. Since the conflict with Russia is unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future, it must at least be administered. The use of proper communication channels, agreed processes, and a bare minimum of transparency can prevent a crisis situation from spiralling out of control.

However, although this step is occasionally proposed, there is no basis for readmitting Russia to the international G7 forum, which would then once again become the G8. When Russia was first admitted to the G7 in 1998, the move was politically motivated and not based on the economic reality that this was a forum created by and for the world's leading industrial nations. To readmit Russia today would be even less appropriate, particularly as it is still a member of the G20, which serves as a forum for important international consultations. The G7 is a de facto "Western"-oriented group within the G20, and Russia simply has no place in it. Cooperation with Russia can be conducted via the NATO-Russia Council or via specialised forums such as the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) which was set up to negotiate with Iran.

The Warsaw Summit will continue the work begun in Wales of restructuring the Alliance to fit the requirements of an Article 5 world. However, this is just one step in a longer process which will demand a substantial amount of effort – especially from NATO's European members.

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