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Looking Forward from the Warsaw NATO Summit: What Next for the Alliance?

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Executive Summary

> The NATO Warsaw Summit in July 2016 came at a particularly challenging time when European security and stability faces threats from both the East and the South.

> The heads of state and government of the NATO member states made some strong commitments that reaffirm the centrality of the transatlantic alliance, including a tangible military presence on the Eastern frontier of the alliance.

> This is a good beginning, but the question remains if it is enough to truly deter additional Russian actions that could further destabilize the European security environment.

> NATO should redouble its focus on its core competencies as a political-military alliance and make a stronger commitment to the security of its most vulnerable members that would act as a more powerful deterrent.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summits are often billed as 'landmark' or 'historic' but the Warsaw summit on 8-9 July 2016 brought together the heads of state and government to consider some issues of true significance for the future of the alliance. Should it focus more on the threat posed by a revanchist Russia, or the instability in the Middle East and North Africa that is sending waves of migrants to Europe? What is the nature of 'hybrid warfare' and how can a defensive alliance such as NATO manage the new challenges to its members' security? These and other questions demand responses that go far beyond the usual platitudes delivered at summit meetings. In addition, the Warsaw summit arrived on the heels of the UK decision to leave the

European Union. Although this has no direct effect on NATO, it opens up the door to unpredictability in Europe that could have security implications.

The purpose of this Policy Brief is to examine the results of the Warsaw summit and consider how they measure up to the challenges of the current security environment. It begins with a brief look at the issues confronting European security prior to the summit. It then outlines the summit's main conclusions and considers how they might be built upon in future NATO summits to better ensure a stable European security environment.

The Main Challenges to European Security

At one level, there is a geographic nature to the challenges that creates a competition between devoting resources towards the Eastern or Southern frontiers. At another level, the alliance is torn between defending against traditional military threats and adjusting to new forms of conflict. Finally, NATO is faced with a resource challenge; after decades of cuts to military spending and a period of declining American attention and leadership, the alliance is under pressure to recapitalize itself.

Russia's seizure of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea has in some ways been a tremendous uniting factor among NATO members. While there were some doubts as to where the culpability fell in the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, it was clear to all members that Russia's actions in Ukraine opened a new era of territorial threats to the alliance. If Russia felt that it could get away with its actions in Ukraine, what was to stop it from attempting to chip away at the sovereignty and territory of former Soviet possessions such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania? True, they have been NATO members for more than a decade, but that would simply provide Russia with a means for demonstrating the hollowness of the alliance if it could engage in actions that are provocative yet below the

threshold at which other members are willing to risk military engagement.

At the same time, the instability on the Southern frontier is of much greater immediate concern to many Mediterranean members. The instability and state failure across the Middle East and North Africa spawned waves of migrants that have overwhelmed the ability of NATO members such as Greece, Turkey and Italy to manage the flow. There is no sign that this will abate; even a political solution to the conflict in Syria would not stop the flow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa that are taking advantage of the chaos in Libya to cross the Mediterranean in search of better lives.

Russia's actions in Ukraine also highlight the nature of 'hybrid warfare' and the need for the alliance to prepare for conflict that involves a wide range of activities that often fall below the level of traditional military hostilities. This can include deceptive information operations, the use of ununiformed personnel in military and paramilitary operations (the 'little green men'), cyber-operations, and other means of influence. Hybrid warfare is a catch-all term that may simply be a convenient shorthand for discussing a complex phenomenon rather than a truly new threat, but NATO is concerned enough to have stood up a unit designed to meet the challenge posed by such forms of pressure.

Finally, the resource issue is critical to the overall discussion. If member states were able to maintain robust military infrastructures, the alliance would be better prepared to manage this wide range of challenges. But the reality is that defence budgets across NATO have fallen consistently since the Cold War and show little indication of rebounding. There is some indication of increased spending in some countries, but this comes on the heels of cuts of 15-30% over the past two decades.

The Outcome of the Warsaw Summit

The summit agenda was closely tied to the issues outlined above, and the final communiqué of the heads of state and government touches on a wide range of critical matters from NATO's relations with Ukraine to its ongoing commitment in Afghanistan.

Before going any further, it is necessary to note what these formal statements are and are not. Summit communiqués are bureaucratic documents arrived at by a consensus of the participants. Every word and phrase is subject to argument and discussion, so any particularly strong language or commitment to action represents a firm decision of the allies, or at least a commitment of those not in favour to remain silent in the face of a concerted effort by the other members to insert such language. This is the basic consensus rule that governs NATO actions and it is important to keep this in mind when reading a summit communiqué. It is not the product of the Secretary General, or the most powerful members of the alliance. Rather, it is a representation of the consensus of all 28 members. Given the challenges mentioned earlier that pull the alliance in different directions, points of clear agreement in the communiqué signify bridges between the different national positions that can be built upon.

Against this backdrop, the main points of the communiqué can be examined. The document devotes considerable attention to the relationship with Russia, both regarding the need to increase NATO's deterrence capabilities and to maintain a reasonable relationship with Russia. It also reaffirms NATO's commitment to building a security relationship with Ukraine, and the symbolism of the meetings the Ukrainian Prime Minister had with NATO leaders in Warsaw was not lost on Russia. NATO is committed to maintaining a rotational presence of US, Canadian, German and other member state armed forces in the states that border Russia. In addition, NATO's ballistic missile defence system went operational during the summit. Although the system is not directed at countering a strategic strike by Russia, it was yet another symbolic move to demonstrate the alliance's commitment to the Eastern members.

The Southern flank of NATO also received a considerable amount of attention in the communiqué. It recognizes the threat of terrorism to all members of the alliance and its roots in failed and failing states in the Middle East. It condemns the government of Syria for its actions (and implicitly Russia for its support), affirms NATO's support to Iraq's government, and underlines the alliance's resolve to contribute to stemming the migrant flow across the Mediterranean.

Resource issues were also highlighted. The communiqué stresses that the alliance is making progress on reversing the long-term decline in defence spending. Five alliance members now spend at least 2% of GDP on defence, and 10 are spending 20% of that on equipment or research and development. The centrepiece of much of NATO's increased ability to project power is the Readiness Action Plan approved at the 2014 summit in Wales. The Warsaw summit pushed that agenda forward with some concrete measures including the creation of a very high readiness

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force capable of deploying in 48-72 hours, a strategic plan for hybrid warfare, and increased attention to maritime forces, particularly in the Black and Baltic seas.

Although the communiqué was particularly lengthy compared to previous summit communiqués, and not all relevant aspects can be commented on here, it is clear that the heads of state and government in Warsaw were trying to send a clear message on a number of fronts: first, that no one should question the resolve of the Alliance and its commitment to Article V, the "attack on one is an attack on all" clause that is at the heart of its deterrent power; second, that NATO is not reticent to name the threats to alliance security and is willing to bring resources to the table to counter them; and, third, that the alliance can maintain focus on more than one region and bring its unique capabilities to bear on a wide range of challenges at one time.

Too Hot, Too Cold or Just Right?

Summit communiqués are designed to send messages to both adversaries and allies. Thus the critical question is, did this one send the right message to both? Is it enough to deter Russia without provoking it? Do both Eastern and Southern members have increased confidence that the alliance is a credible means of ensuring their security? Have NATO members truly committed to resolving the defence budget shortfalls that have plagued the alliance for years?

The most significant issue is deterring any further Russian encroachment on the sovereignty of its neighbours at this stage. To that end, NATO is placing forces in the front line states, but only a few thousand ground troops. There will be four brigades of approximately 1000 troops each, with the United States contributing one company to each brigade. Germany, the UK, Canada and the Baltic states will contribute the remaining forces and all will be stationed on a rotational rather than a permanent basis. Contrast this with the multiple divisions Russia routinely involves in exercises on the border with Poland and the Baltic states and the disparity becomes clear. Obviously a few thousand troops from NATO member countries would be completely overwhelmed should one of those exercises become an invasion, but theoretically they should act as the sort of 'tripwire' that a small number of US troops in West Berlin were during the Cold War. Those American military personnel were not expected to defend the city. Rather, their presence in any hostilities would guarantee a larger American response.

It is not at all clear if this tripwire strategy is an effective deterrent in the current environment. Given US reluctance to provide serious military assistance to Ukraine after the Russian invasion, its reticence to take a leadership role in NATO's operation in Libya, and its willingness to abandon missile defence in Europe to further its strategic arms control aims with Russia, it is indeed far from clear if the United States has the same sort of commitment to European security it once did. True, the US announced a 'reassurance package' that commits some additional resources to Europe, but that merely brings its presence back to where it was a few years ago. Rather than a tripwire that would ensure a massive American response to an invasion of the Baltic states, for example, Russia could come to the logical conclusion that those NATO troops could be bargaining chips if taken as hostages in a quick military action with overwhelming force. If deterrence is to work, it must be credible. The commitments made at Warsaw are a good start, but a more significant military presence on the ground, backed up by air power, would go a long way toward making NATO's defence of its most vulnerable members truly credible.

On the Southern frontier, NATO should make it clear that its role is necessarily limited by the mismatch between the nature of the challenges and the strengths of the alliance. Beyond assisting the EU and member states with border patrol through airborne and sea-based platforms, NATO is not the most appropriate forum for what is essentially a domestic security issue in Europe. The European Union would be a better institution to address this issue through improved intelligence coordination, common border control through FRONTEX, and other tools at its disposal. NATO is a political-military alliance, whereas the EU has a far broader remit best suited to addressing complex issues that impact on the domestic security of its members. However, there is a near universal acknowledgment that the limited nature of EU-NATO cooperation is problematic. It remains blocked by the so-called 'participation problem' involving Turkey and Cyprus. As a result, the summit communiqué only mentions EU-NATO cooperation briefly and has little to say about how it might be improved.

NATO could conceivably act as a stabilizing force in some of the failing and failed states on the periphery of Europe, but there is no appetite for such actions given the exhaustion with Afghanistan and the highly volatile environments in Libya, Syria and elsewhere involving the fight against the 'Islamic State', which is responsible for terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in the past year. Even with a UN mandate and a more permissive environment,

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few NATO members would be willing and able to commit boots on the ground in the Middle East or North Africa.

This leads to the issue of defence budgets. The summit communiqué was correct to highlight the turnaround in defence spending, but it is a very small rise in an otherwise declining trend line. Defence spending is likely to continue to decline across the alliance, including in the US, for a variety of reasons. In the short term, weak economic growth, high unemployment and domestic spending pressures will impact on the European allies' ability to spend more. In the longer term, all of the allies face budgetary stresses, such as those stemming from demography, forcing it to spend more to sustain their retired population with a shrinking taxable work force. Defence budgets are unlikely to grow in such a fiscal environment.

All of this makes it critical that NATO focuses on what it does best and what is truly existential for it as a defensive alliance. The defence of the Eastern flank should be the central focus of NATO right now. This is not to say that other regions are not important, but it is the Eastern front line states that face a direct challenge. Should Russia conclude that it is worth the risk of a limited war to destroy the credibility of NATO, the alliance could face a choice between a war opposing nuclear powers or fracturing the most successful and longest lasting alliance in modern history. Credible deterrence backed by significant commitments could be the single most important factor in preserving a stable European security environment.

Further Reading

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