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“NATO 2030. United for a new era”: a Digest

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On 25 November 2020 the independent Reflection Group, established by the NATO Secretary General following the December 2019 London Leaders meeting, released its report titled “NATO 2030: United for a New Era”.¹ Composed of ten leading personalities,² the Group was mandated to look at NATO’s current and future role and suggest recommendations on how to reinforce Alliance unity, political consultation between Allies, and NATO’s political role.

The initiative came implicitly as a response to the French President’s statement about NATO being “brain dead”, made in the context of the October 2019 US withdrawal from northern Syria and the subsequent Turkish operation there, both apparently carried out without consultation within NATO.

The Report is divided into three parts, looking in sequence at: the vision and main findings; the security and political environment; and recommendations.

Vision and main findings

The first part sets the stage of the Report by emphasizing the political legacy of the Alliance and the need to further strengthen its political role. In line with the 1956 Wise Men Group’s report and the 1967 Harmel report, the stress is put on NATO’s ability to adapt and go beyond its military role, notably by fostering a “convergence of political

and strategic priorities”. While NATO is considered to be a “strategic anchor” and stands as “history’s most successful alliance”, it is also subject to uncertainties that are likely to become even more salient in the coming years. In response, the Alliance is to “cement its ability to act as the principal political forum” of the transatlantic community, for NATO’s disunity is not a tactical, but rather a strategic problem.

The Reflection Group offers a vision for NATO in the coming decade, during which the Alliance should:

- uphold its role as the bedrock of peace and stability;
- remain the strategic centre of gravity for collective defence;
- strengthen its role as the unique forum to which Allies turn for consultations on major national security challenges, proactively seeking to forge consensus;
- play a larger part in an international order in which open societies flourish;
- enjoy deeper strategic connections with partners;
- intensify consultations with the European Union.

To achieve this, Allies should:

- adhere to the democratic principles of the North Atlantic Treaty;
- share the burden that comes with collective security;
- ensure that their actions do not undermine the cohesion of the Alliance;
- put collective defence at the forefront of consultation;
- enable swift decision-making.

The security and political environment

The second part of the Report offers a succinct yet candid analysis of the security and political environment.

The Security environment

The Reflection Group stresses the return of systemic rivalry and geopolitical competition, with Russia and China occupying most of the analysis. While Russia is presented as threatening the Alliance in both kinetic and non-kinetic domains and will “most likely remain the main military threat to the Alliance” in the coming decade, China is described as a “very different kind of challenge”. Unlike Russia, China is not “at present, a direct military threat to the

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1 “NATO 2030: United for a new era. Analysis and recommendations of the Reflection Group appointed by the NATO Secretary General”, Brussels, 25 November 2020.

2 John Bew, Greta Bossenmaier, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, Marta Dassù, Anna Fotyga, Tacan Ildem, Thomas de Maizièrre (co-chair), A. Wess Mitchell (co-chair), Hubert Védrine, and Herta Verhagen.

Euro-Atlantic area”. China nonetheless promises to be *the* forthcoming challenge that will change the “strategic calculus of the Alliance”. That China can be both an opportunity and a challenge is reiterated, yet the Report only deals with the latter. Because it uses force against its neighbours, resorts to economic coercion or diplomatic intimidation, is active in disinformation, has little respect for human rights and international law, and is engaged in an ambitious military build-up, China is the challenge that must get NATO’s attention. Less central to the analysis, terrorism, the South, emerging disruptive technologies (EDTs), climate change and pandemics are then briefly reviewed.

The Political environment

Faced with these threats and challenges, Allies are not always united, the Reports says. Interestingly, the Report asserts that while there seems to be “strong common agreement among national governments” and experts “on the nature of the strategic environment and threat assessment”, the “way in which Allies assess different threats” can diverge. Equally problematic is the “differing extent” to which Allies invest in maintaining the Alliance’s defence capabilities (in reference to the 2014 Wales Summit defence investment pledge). Last but not least, the unity of the Alliance is hobbled by “disputes between Allies” which sometimes bring “disagreements on external matters into NATO, occasionally straining cohesion”.

Recommendations

Recommendations appear in four different sections, dealing respectively with “NATO’s political purpose”, “NATO’s political role with regard to emerging threats”, “NATO’s political cohesion”, and “NATO’s political consultation”. They are presented below as a summary and in telegraphic style.

NATO’s political purpose (p.22): for a more proactive and preventative role

The Reflection Group reiterates the need for political cohesion within the Alliance, which can be fostered if NATO continues to “upgrade the political ways, means, and ends of its work”, maintains “political solidarity” and pursues “long-term stability of the external environment”.

More specifically, the Report insists on the need to do this in a *proactive* manner. NATO would benefit from “continuing to undertake this effort proactively rather than waiting to address political deficits reactively”, and from “adopting a long-term perspective and re-embracing the vision of NATO from earlier decades – as a preventative tool to shape its environment rather than primarily an instrument for managing crises.”

NATO’s political role with regard to emerging threats (pp.22-49): for a new Strategic Concept

The main recommendation under this heading is for a new Strategic Concept, as the current one was developed prior to the “return of confrontation with Russia and systemic

rivalry with China”, and is therefore an “inadequate basis for responding to the current geopolitical environment”.

While updating the Strategic Concept, NATO will keep in mind that “the three core tasks of collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security, remain highly pertinent”, and that “the development of a new Strategic Concept should be seen as an opportunity to establish clear priorities and solidify cohesion”. Further attention should be paid to “the emerging challenge of China”, “the need to incorporate terrorism more fully into the core tasks”, and to “reflecting the increasing role of hybrid threats and the implications of EDTs”. The Report also proposes the creation of an assessment office to examine NATO’s strategic environment, and recommends that NATO develops a practice of wargaming within the North Atlantic Council.

A long list of policy recommendations follows:

Russia. Recommendations on Russia follow the pattern of what NATO has done since 2014 in terms of deterrence and defence, while also referring to the dual-track approach of defence and dialogue. The Report also suggests that NATO should monitor Russia-China cooperation.

China. The main message is that NATO must devote more time, greater resources and action to China. NATO must “increase political coordination” on China; “infuse the China challenge throughout existing structures”; “establish a consultative body to bring together Allies and other actors for information-sharing on China”; “develop a political strategy for approaching a world in which China will be of growing importance”; but also keep up open political dialogue with China and show that “NATO has no quarrel with the Chinese people”.

EDTs. The Report suggests to enact NATO’s EDT Implementation Strategy; to “compete with the efforts underway by large authoritarian regimes on EDTs”; to “serve as a crucial coordinating institution for information sharing on EDTs”; to embed EDTs into the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP); to “support technological proficiency of its leadership”; to expand cooperation with the private sector “beyond ‘classical’ partners”. NATO should also consider adopting the equivalent of the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) to support innovation.

Terrorism. Counter-terrorism is to be better integrated into NATO’s core tasks; terrorism must be part of the conversation on hybrid and cyber security; Allies must improve intelligence sharing on terrorism; and NATO should aim to “improve resilience of Allies to terrorism”.

The South. NATO must develop a coherent approach to the South, addressing both traditional threats from the region and new ones, in relation to Russia and China; maintain its political focus on building up military preparedness for the Southern flank; and liaise better with the European Union (EU) on the South.

Arms control and nuclear deterrence. NATO is to become a forum for debate on arms control; a clear narrative must be developed on nuclear weapons; Allies should

reaffirm their commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and have a clear position on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Ban Treaty) “namely that it will never contribute to practical disarmament, nor will it affect international law”; China should be involved in future arms control negotiations; NATO should develop an agenda for arms control in key areas of EDTs with military applications; nuclear deterrence must remain the bedrock of NATO’s security; nuclear-sharing arrangements must be revitalized; and the Alliance must better communicate on the role of nuclear deterrence.

Energy security. More political consultations and information sharing on energy security are needed; the Alliance must tackle the connections between energy security and hybrid tactics, and further advance the ‘smart energy’ agenda to enhance energy efficiency.

Climate and green defence. The Report reaffirms that climate change will shape the security environment; enhanced situational awareness in the High North is required, as is a strategy that includes the High North that falls within SACEUR’s area of responsibility. The Alliance must assess the impact of climate change on security; consider creating a Centre of Excellence on Climate and Security; pursue efforts to include climate change in NATO planning and exercises; revise the 2014 Green Defence framework; and use the Science for Peace and Security programme more strategically.

Human security and Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The Alliance must better incorporate human security into NATO’s strategic documents; considerations on the WPS agenda should be better shared; and Allies should better liaise with civil society on human security and WPS.

Pandemics and natural disasters. Lessons must be learned from the COVID-19 crisis, while keeping in mind the centrality of the deterrence and defence posture; pandemics and natural disasters must be incorporated into exercises.

Hybrid and cyber threats. The current fragmentation of policies on hybrid threats within NATO countries must be addressed; NATO must support Allies in defending against cyber and hybrid attacks; build greater awareness on hybrid threats; support the development of a comprehensive response framework for countering hybrid threats and building resilience; and have the ability to recruit and train staff on cyber issues.

Outer space. NATO is to become the “essential transatlantic forum for consultation on space security”; must include outer space in resilience planning; ensure the free access to outer space for peaceful purposes; and promote dialogue with the private sector.

Strategic communication. NATO must accelerate the transformation of its strategic communication; improve communication with its citizens to build support for NATO’s aims and policies; and enhance cooperation with partners in addressing disinformation.

NATO’s political cohesion (pp.50-52): for a “code of conduct”

The Report distinguishes between interests and values, and calls for the nurturing of both agendas as a means to ensure unity. Allies should reaffirm their commitment to the Alliance as the principal institution for their defence, and “pledge themselves to a code of good conduct to abide by the spirit and the letter of the Treaty”. This would *inter alia* imply that Allies consult on all major issues of Euro-Atlantic security; make good-faith efforts to settle any dispute in which an Ally is involved with another Ally; and refrain from politically motivated blockage for matters outside NATO’s remit.

Allies should, furthermore, reaffirm NATO’s identity as an Alliance of democracies; they should meet burden-sharing requirements, in particular in reference to defence spending and capability development. Allies should consider the creation of a Centre of Excellence for Democratic Resilience. The Report also invites the Secretary General to offer his good offices whenever an Ally is involved in a conflict.

NATO’s political consultation (pp.53-63): for more efficient decision-making

The Report takes stock of the fact that political consultations have intensified since 2014 and are a condition for cohesion, but also that decisions must be taken in a timely manner.

Among Allies. The Report calls for systematic consultations among Allies, and for NATO to become *the* forum for addressing the strategic questions Allies are facing; Allies are encouraged to inform the NAC of new developments in their policies which may affect other members’ interests; Allied Foreign Ministers should periodically assess NATO’s political state of health; NATO should hold consultations on issues beyond the traditional agenda and hold informal meetings (including with the private sector and academia).

With the EU. NATO and the EU should be animated by a shared vision of transatlantic unity; unnecessary duplication of efforts and capabilities is pointless, yet a stronger European defence will contribute to a stronger NATO; NATO and the EU should reinvigorate trust, and implement existing arrangements; the two organizations should establish an institutionalized link between them through the setting-up of a standing political liaison office; they should try to coordinate their strategic communications on issues of common concern; on-going European efforts should be better used to increase the part played by European Allies in support of NATO capability targets. “Efforts at EU ‘strategic autonomy’ should be developed in a spirit of NATO cohesion and with the aim of achieving a common vision.”

With partners. NATO should outline a blueprint on how partnerships can be used to advance NATO’s strategic interests in a more competitive geopolitical era; an interest-driven – rather than the current demand-driven ap-

proach – should be adopted, in which NATO prioritizes what it does with partners based on strategic needs; Allies must develop new partnerships that serve NATO’s strategic priorities; and should prefer thematic rather than only geographic partnerships.

Political decision-making. The Report reaffirms the importance of consensus as a cornerstone of the Alliance, but also points to the necessity to reach decisions in a timely fashion and to overcome “single-country blockages”. “If and when Allies seek to stall or obstruct implementation of agreed policies, the International Staff Chair of the Committee should insist on adherence to the agreed policy”. “NATO should create a more structured mechanism to support the establishment of coalitions inside existing Alliance structures”, so that Allies could bring “new operations under a NATO chapeau, even when not all Allies wish to participate”. NATO should time-limit decision-making, with options for ensuring NATO’s ability to achieve consensus within 24 hours in a crisis-setting.

Political structure, staffing and resources. The Secretary General should be given more delegated authority for decisions on personnel and budget; NATO should improve its talent acquisition and retention methods; and increase staff rotations; the Civil Budget should be increased; noting the “success of the NATO Defense College in building organizational talent”, NATO should establish a NATO University aimed at young people acquiring a sense of Atlantic community; and should establish a Fellowship Programme to encourage educational exchanges.

Analysis

In accordance with its mandate, the Report mainly deals with the political aspects of NATO’s adaptation, and only marginally refers to the Alliance’s military dimension: NATO “needs a process of political adaptation to match the progress made in the military sphere” since 2014. In so doing, the Report focuses on policy recommendations (more than 120 of them) rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of the international security environment. As such, the Report can be considered as a valuable source of proposals for the Secretary General and the Allies to move forward.

In this context, central to the Report is:

- the need for a new Strategic Concept that would reflect recent changes in NATO’s posture, as well as provide a new direction;
- the need for NATO to upgrade its understanding of, and response to, China; and
- the need for Allies to abide by the consultative process and seek consensus.

Three additional comments are in order. First, the narrative of the entire report is rather conventional, notably in reference to NATO’s three core tasks. Deterrence and defence are even given prominence over projecting stability (which is barely mentioned in the Report), while the “South” is not addressed on a par with the challenges coming from Russia, and soon from China. And if the Report suggests that terrorism should be better incorporated into NATO’s agenda, terrorism as a threat is secondary to the “systemic rivalry” (and terrorism comes after EDTs in the section on recommendations). In this context, whether there is consensus among Allies on the need to address the China challenge through NATO remains to be seen.

Second, many of the recommendations on how to improve political consultations will sound like wishful-thinking to many observers, first because much depends on the goodwill of Allies, and second because a lack of consultation is often a sign of deeper political divergences. In fact, while the Report mentions the existence of “strains on Allied unity”, the issue of a possible transatlantic rift is not given much attention, neither are the existing tensions on values within the Alliance. Of course, no countries are “named and shamed” in the Report, nor is any reference made to how the Trump administration or the Erdogan regime may have impacted Alliance unity.

Finally, while most of the Reflection process was carried out virtually because of the concomitant lockdown in Europe, the Report is not about NATO in a post-COVID world; pandemics are addressed, but the human security debate is confined to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and nowhere is it suggested that pandemics or similar risks will significantly shape NATO’s future role. On the contrary, what transpires from the Report is the continued need for an Alliance that must primarily deter and defend.



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