

# Rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic?

## *NATO's Warsaw Summit*

Stanley R. Sloan

The July NATO summit in Warsaw certainly did more than re-arrange the transatlantic deckchairs. But, as with most NATO summits, it left unsettled important issues that were not on the agenda as well as questions about implementation of those agreements that were.

The summit was dramatically upstaged by the British referendum on June 23 that initiated British withdrawal (“Brexit”) from membership in the European Union (EU). The choice of slightly more than 50% of those voting had no formal impact on the transatlantic alliance, but it nonetheless raised fundamental questions about the EU’s future and potential implications for NATO. Moreover, it represented a surprise gift to Russian president Vladimir Putin, as it promised to remove the country most skeptical about his motivations from the EU decision-making table, where some of the most critical choices concerning future policy toward Russia will be made.

After the Brexit bombshell, perhaps the most important result of the Warsaw Summit was that it confirmed NATO as the main pillar of Western cohesion at a time when the EU is facing not only Brexit implementation but also the potential for other member states to consider abandoning the integration process. All this comes while the EU’s plate of problems is already full with other issues, including immigration challenges and continued implementation of sanctions against Russia. Moreover, once again, the community-building process in Europe faces the choice between an ever-deepening union and settling for what French President Charles de Gaulle called a *Europe des États*, in which the core nationalism of the members is preserved.

As the EU struggles with growing nationalist sentiments in many member countries, NATO’s very nature gives it some protection from those who “want to take their country back.” That protection is a consequence of the fact that the North Atlantic Treaty was written to help protect the sovereign integrity and security of its member states. Moreover, the fact that most decisions are made by consensus means that every nation can either prevent consensus or stand aside from decisions that they regard as inconsistent with their interests. On the one hand, this complicates and slows decision-making in the alliance. But on the other hand it gives every nation a role in the process. Over the years, some observers have noted that “votes” at NATO are “weighed, not counted,” reflecting the reality that the states contributing the most to the alliance have the greatest influence. Some truth remains in this saying, but it does not diminish the importance of the “sovereignty principle” held by each member. So, while the EU aims at integration, NATO operates on cooperation.

### Defense and détente revisited

The articles that follow examine in more detail some of the key areas addressed at the Warsaw Summit. There were some significant accomplishments. On the first day, EU and NATO leaders agreed on a joint declaration that pledges intensified cooperation in dealing with the wide variety of threats and challenges currently facing Europe.



Commenting on the Joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation<sup>1</sup> issued there, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said it "...sends a clear message: a stronger European Union means a stronger NATO, and a stronger NATO means a stronger European Union."<sup>2</sup>

The communique issued by allied leaders the following day<sup>3</sup> sent several important messages. Most importantly, the allies confirmed decisions taken at the September 2014 Wales summit to deploy multinational rotating military units in the Baltic member states and Poland to reassure those allies that NATO's collective defense provision (Article 5) do apply to them and that any Russian aggression would in its very early stages encounter troops from many NATO countries, including the United States. The allies also took steps to enhance NATO's military presence in the Baltic and Black seas. The allies congratulated themselves on the fact that overall allied defense expenditures in 2016 would increase for the first time since 2009. They also declared the Initial Operational Capability of NATO's ballistic missile defense, while assuring Russia that the system did nothing to degrade its strategic missile capabilities. And, all allies pledged to strengthen their own cyber defenses and they recognized cyberspace as a new operational domain for the alliance.

These steps left no doubt that NATO was focusing strongly on the mutual commitment to defend the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all its member states, while

detering attacks with the full range of capabilities, including nuclear ones. However, in spite of pressures to turn the alliance's back on threats beyond NATO borders and opportunities for cooperation and outreach, the allies confirmed the three "core tasks" for the alliance described in NATO's strategic concept, agreed at a summit in Lisbon, Portugal in November 2010. The tasks are described as collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security. For practical purposes, this means that NATO will seek to help member states defend against threats from all directions, will deploy forces beyond borders (in Afghanistan, for example) when crisis management missions would help defend allied interests, and will enhance cooperation with partner states in and beyond Europe as well as promote dialogue with adversaries, most notably Russia.

Montenegro's seat at the NATO table for the summit confirmed that it is on its way to membership. However, it said little about the future for NATO's "open door" policy. While the summit made a cautious nod in the direction of Georgia's aspirations for membership as well as those of the Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the sensitive issue of Ukraine's desire to join was kept on a back burner. The allies did, however, agree to provide more assistance to Kiev to strengthen its partnership with NATO and improve its ability to resist further Russian encroachment.



Perhaps the most important accomplishment of the communique drafting exercise was its success in accommodating different allied positions on two important questions. First, the communique dealt with the split in the alliance between those allies in the north most threatened by recent Russian actions and those that are particularly challenged by refugees and terrorist threats from the south by declaring both of these threats top alliance priorities. Second, a division between those perceiving threats from Russia and others seeing business opportunities lost due to sanctions was accommodated by strong accusations against Moscow for its threatening behaviors balanced by endorsement of dialogue with Russia to mitigate the risk of military confrontation while seeking avenues for cooperation. This outcome echoes the Harmel Doctrine that advocated pursuing “defense and détente” — a formula that accommodated conflicting pressures from the political left and right in the alliance from its inception

*The alliance is also threatened by internal fractures*

in the 1960s through the end of the Cold War. Today, the formula is expressed as “deterrence and dialogue,” but the meaning is the same.

### The return of history?

While not on the agenda in Warsaw, the leaders could not escape the fact that the alliance is threatened not only by Russia’s attempt to revise the post-Cold War outcome and the refugee and terrorist challenges from the south, but also by internal fractures that could threaten both the value foundation and the cohesion of the alliance.

President Obama somewhat surprisingly cautioned the host government that it should protect Polish democracy and ensure continued respect for the rule of law — a frank but perhaps warranted criticism of recent actions seen as centralizing government control.

The role of the United States as the leader of the alliance was earlier called into question by the administration’s approach to European defense prior to the Russian seizure of Crimea. The “pivot,” or “rebalance,” of US security efforts toward Asia combined with not-so-subtle pressure on the European allies to take more responsibility for



their own defense, raised questions about the reliability of future US leadership in the alliance.

Since 2014 the administration has responded to the concerns of the northern allies with new assertions of support (the European Reassurance Initiative) and significant increases in future funding for US forces in Europe. But the overall thrust of previous Obama policy seemed to lend some legitimacy to the anti-NATO attitude of Donald Trump, now the Republican Party's candidate for president.

The Trump candidacy is perhaps the most important variable influencing the future of transatlantic relations. For many Europeans and Americans, it seems impossible that a candidate like Trump could actually win the presidency. However, the fact that Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee, has been wounded by the email server issue and, in general, does not appeal to some major segments of the electorate, suggests that the outcome is uncertain. And how a President Trump would approach the alliance as well as foreign and defense policy more generally remains highly unpredictable.

There are some commonalities between Trump's base of support in the United States and the forces that pushed through Brexit in the UK and those that reflect illiberal

tendencies on the continent. In all cases, immigration and terrorism have energized segments of the populations who feel that they have been dispossessed by "the establishment," globalism, multi-culturalism and, in the case of Brexit, by the EU's perceived impositions on British sovereignty.

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The Brexit affair is obviously too complex to explain simply as a British nationalistic response to the EU globalist regime. However, it is not misleading to suggest that strong nationalist sentiments have emerged not just in the UK but in Europe more generally. The movements and political parties around Europe that oppose their country's membership in the EU also question their membership in NATO and, in general, are opposed to US influence in European affairs. At the same time, they tend to favor Russian President Putin's style of "leadership" and maintain close ties with Russia, opposing sanctions against Moscow imposed after Russia's seizure of the Crimea. And

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Russia is bankrolling their support in an effort to chip away at the foundations of Euro-Atlantic institutions it considers a threat. France's National Front reportedly received a 9.4 million euro loan from Russia in November 2014.<sup>4</sup> Marine Le Pen, the party's leader, maintained that the loan was not a reward for having supported Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier that year.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has remained a strong, pro-US, NATO and EU leader. However, many German business interests and leading politicians — along with others around Europe — have over the past decade become dependent on doing business with Russian firms as well as the Russian government. This factor combined with incredibly effective propaganda emanating from Moscow led to a phenomenon in which many Germans became Putin Verstehers, or Putin "understanders," serving effectively as apologists for Putin's aggressive actions against Ukraine and threats against NATO allies.

### Implementation: no guarantees

Even before one takes into account the uncertainties raised by current political trends on both sides of the Atlantic, it is wise to remind ourselves of some more standard concerns about whether and how the summit commitments will be implemented.

The EU-NATO agreement, as important as it is, provides that any member of either organization can block specific cooperative steps between the two organizations. This provision, although not a surprise, brings to mind the fact that such cooperation has been hindered in the past by a couple of obstacles. First, there are traditional French concerns, shared in EU institutions, that the EU not be seen as subordinated to NATO. This has been less of a problem ever since France returned to the NATO Integrated Command Structure, but remains a potential source of impasse. More importantly, the main obstacle to EU cooperation with NATO is the continuing conflict between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus, which, in the past, has blocked previous cooperative efforts.

The agreements to enhance collective defense capabilities require continuing increases in defense expenditures which remain, as always, dependent on the political will of member states, their perception of the threats (from the north and the south) and their economic circumstances. British leaders have emphasized that the exit from the EU would not mean a diminished role in European defense or in NATO. However, if some of the most pessimistic

projections of Brexit's economic costs for the UK are anywhere near accurate, it is hard to see this leading European member of the alliance maintaining current levels of defense expenditures, to say nothing of increasing spending and growing capabilities.

The divisions mentioned earlier regarding which threats should be prioritized and how policy toward Russia should be balanced were nicely papered over in the summit communique. If the illiberal parties and tendencies in EU and NATO member states grow stronger, the ability of those states to manage EU border and immigration issues, increase defense efforts, and maintain a sanctions regime toward Russia could all be threatened.

The bottom line, therefore, is that NATO's future credibility as a values-based alliance will depend not just on more effective defense spending and other security measures, but also on the quality of the democratic systems and market economies of the member states. While the summit was undoubtedly a success, the fact is that its results could look like rearranging deckchairs on the transatlantic Titanic if some of the most disruptive potential political changes in the United States and Europe not only undermine NATO cohesion but also threaten to unravel the entire fabric of transatlantic cooperation.

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