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What NATO should really fear

THE WARSAW SUMMIT AND THE RETURN OF WESTERN NATIONALISM

The current rise of American and European nationalism reveals the fragile foundations of multilateral institutions. In the absence of a robust collective “we”, NATO’s last resort in dealing with Russia may be the rhetoric of dangerous securitisation. The NATO 2016 summit must focus on how to develop a responsible narrative of collective identity, leaving behind the current rationale of cost benefit-driven national commitments.

In a warm-up to the 2016 NATO summit, Condoleezza Rice gave a very well received speech on “Renewing the Transatlantic Alliance” at Chatham House in London in the autumn. Rice spoke in the midst of the

RECOMMENDATIONS

The governments of NATO states should:

- Recognise how the NATO security discourse of uncertainty, agility and flexibility has itself contributed to the current push for opportunism, nationalism and anti-collectivism.
- Address how the absence of a robust NATO “we” may ultimately tempt the alliance to intensify its rhetoric towards Russia in order to mobilise public, political and financial member state support.
- Develop a more responsible narrative of mobilisation built around a securitisation not of singular external enemies, but of unregulated state power and geopolitical rivalry per se.

NATO's military and economic robustness means little if its political muscle – the 'we' with a will to act – dissolves

If NATO does not address the problem of an eroding culture of multilateralism, it may soon land itself in a situation where speaking the language of danger is the only means to mobilize public, political and financial member state support.

British "Brexit" campaign, a European Union in near dissolution over rising migration numbers, and a US presidential race defined by sentiments of American isolationism. Yet both she and her European audience aired a complacent kind of optimism: Europe remains America's most important ally, NATO its most important security framework.

With the 2016 Warsaw summit now upon us, Brexit a reality, and Donald Trump's isolationism the Republican Party's elected presidential bid, such complacency must be done away with. According to NATO headquarters, and to the Polish hosts in particular, the most pressing problem to be addressed at the summit is that of an increasingly assertive Russia: how to balance "new" ambitions for out-of-area stabilisation and conflict resolution with "old" agendas of regional geopolitical balancing.

At face value this may look like the usual debate over money and men: how shall we divide the costs? At a deeper level though, it concerns the issue of collective identity and public mobilisation: what "we"? In that respect, the most basic problem that ought to be addressed in Warsaw concerns not Russia, but the idea of liberal order itself: how to act potently and yet with restraint and sensibility if there is no "we" behind the action.

If NATO does not address the problem of an eroding culture of multilateralism, it may soon land itself in a situation where speaking the language of danger is the only means to mobilise public, political and financial member state support. Such language comes at a high price, as it would entrap NATO policymakers in the rhetoric of securitisation and cut NATO off from dealing with Russia in a cool-headed, responsible and balanced manner.

Flexibility, but not opportunism

Several developments have contributed to the revitalisation of nationalist and anti-globalist sentiment in current Western politics, many of them beyond political control. Yet dilemmas inherent to the security narrative propagated by NATO and its member state governments in recent years are part of the equation too. Since the end of the Cold War the NATO security narrative has been one of uncertainty and of a related need for strategic "agility" or "adaptability". Combined with an understanding of the global order as increasingly fluid, multipolar and unpredictable, this narrative has pushed for more "flexible" types of international cooperation; for less rigid rules and more case-by-case types of partnership.

This has happened for good reason and, overall, alternatives to the demand for flexibility seem impossible. However, it has also fed a number of unintended and in some ways dangerous trends, loosening the ties of multilateral institutions as well as the broader political and public identification with multilateral culture and supra-national ideals. Seeking to cultivate institutional capacity for flexibility, a by-product has been the stimulation of a logic of opportunism and a call for more "national interest-centred policies" across NATO capitals. The effect of this reasoning is now clear, as country after country expresses growing scepticism towards "expensive" multilateral commitments that do not have an immediate national pay-off.

Grand politics before grand strategy

Consequently NATO now faces a situation where the very foundations of collective action may be crumbling. While the Warsaw summit seems focused on questions of grand strategy alone (how to handle an assertive Russia; how to refocus on Europe while

maintaining global reach), the much more fundamental question of grand politics (how to forge a “we” that can act in the first place) must take centre stage. This is not to say that debates over burden sharing are obsolete. But it does suggest that NATO’s military and economic robustness means little if its political muscle – the “we” with a will to act – dissolves. Conversations at Warsaw should begin with the recognition that the cost-benefit types of appeal to public audiences that have become definitive of Western politics across the political field in recent years, ultimately erode the very “we” upon which NATO action rests, pushing the alliance into a situation where only the language of danger will mobilise support at times of crisis.

To take the nature of this claim and the dangers implicit in its continued neglect seriously, NATO must address the dilemmas inherent to a strategy that seeks to cultivate flexibility, yet does not want to foster nationalist, geopolitical opportunism. This is a real challenge. It must also understand and tackle the ways in which that return of nationalist, geopolitical opportunism erodes a robust NATO “we”, ultimately tempting the alliance to intensify its rhetoric vis-à-vis Russia for the purpose of mobilising even modest

public, political and financial member state support. This means developing an alternative, more substantially multilateral, narrative of collective security.

Less regional alliance, more collective security

Such a narrative has a choice to make between regional alliance and genuine collective security. From its inception, NATO has perceived itself as a broker of peace, not a harbinger of conflict. That ambition stands at a critical juncture. At a moment where the division and nature of global power is in flux, where various actors outside NATO are assuming more



Top: Arriving in Scotland after Britain’s vote to leave the EU, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump saluted the outcome, saying “they took back their country, it’s a great thing.” © Andrew Milligan/AP

Bottom: Polish Army and US Army soldiers attend the opening ceremony of the Anaconda-16 military exercise in Warsaw, Poland, June 6, 2016. © Alik Keplicz/AP

assertive strategies of influence, and where intensified Western nationalism is eroding the multilateral culture upon which NATO's capacity for action rests, NATO may well feel tempted to choose the route of rhetorical securitisation and geopolitical balancing. It may, in short, choose to manifest itself simply as a regional security alliance – one power player among others.

Yet it may also choose to seek to stop the return of nationalist geopolitics in its tracks – an ambition which was always part of the NATO legacy too. At a moment of heightened Western nationalism, NATO governments could choose to recommit themselves to that element of its original *raison d'être* which saw unbound, unregulated national sovereignty as part of the security problem. To some extent this means transcending the idea of NATO as an institution that

simply enhances national power by “pooling” it among the power allies, and committing to an idea of NATO that ultimately seeks peace through the regulation of sovereignty and the “embedding” of statehood. It means (re)developing a narrative of NATO as an ultimately globalist institution, committed to supranational and, as such, UN-anchored collective security.

NATO governments, in short, must use Warsaw to think deep and hard about the link between rising Western nationalism and alliance identity. Are there alternatives to current strategies of public mobilisation – and is there the political courage to adopt them? If not, a dangerous course of mobilising support by securitising Russia seems an all too likely consequence, entrapping the West in a logic bound to spiral out of control.

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Cover photo: US Secretary of State John Kerry is greeted by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg prior to a round table meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels in December 2015 © AP Photo/Virginia Mayo

