

Commentary

NATO and the transatlantic relationship

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This article is a transcript of Michael Rühle's key note speech at the special symposium organized on November 2, 2017 by the Netherlands Atlantic Association to celebrate its 65th anniversary.

We are meeting at a time of doubt about the future of the transatlantic relationship. Once again, we are told that we must brace ourselves for the coming end of Atlanticism. The evidence seems overwhelming: Over there, across the Atlantic Ocean, the clarion call is "America first" — a concept that does not fit all that well with the idea of trustful and trusting cooperation among Allies. Over here, in Europe, "Brexit" and the spectre of rising populism has done considerable damage to the European idea, and European nations risk turning inwards.

So, is this the beginning of the end of the transatlantic security relationship? Are we perhaps even witnessing the beginning of the end of NATO?

To answer these questions, I suggest doing something very simple: Let us look back at the recent history of the transatlantic relationship. Because then it will become clear that the current phase of uncertainty is nothing new. In fact, uncertainty about the course of the transatlantic security partnership was the norm, rather than the exception. And what better time to start with our short whistle-stop tour than the year in which the Netherlands Atlantic Association was founded: 1952.

1952 was the peak of the Korean War, a war that helped bring the "O" into NATO. The Washington Treaty was institutionalised in an International Organisation. But 1952 was also the year in which the Allies agreed on the so-called "Lisbon Force Goals" of standing up over 90 divisions — goals that the Allies were never able to meet. Thus, 1952 also marked the beginning of the transatlantic burden sharing debate — a debate that never really subsided.

In 1956 came the Suez crisis, which pitted the three major Western powers Britain, France and the United States against each other. A year later, the West was experiencing the "Sputnik Shock". From now on, the US homeland would be vulnerable to Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles. But American attempts to change NATO's strategy — to move from massive retaliation to a less nuclearized flexible response — were opposed by the European Allies. It took almost a decade to agree on a new strategy.

And when "flexible response" was finally adopted in 1967, not many took notice. Why? Because 1966 and 1967 were by far the worst years in the history of NATO. It was not the Soviet threat, nor was it the ever-deeper involvement of the United States in Vietnam that caused this crisis. It was de Gaulle's France, a founding member of the Alliance, who had decided that it had enough of what it perceived as American dominance over European affairs. De Gaulle ordered all 75,000 US soldiers to leave France — a decision that prompted the US Secretary of State to ask if he also meant the ones buried at the military cemeteries.

France left NATO's integrated military structure. NATO Headquarters had to be re-located from Paris to Brussels. The mood was gloomy. A departing NATO Ambassador told his colleagues in the North Atlantic Council: "I am sorry to be leaving you all, but I am very glad that I won't be here to see this great organization break up."

Enter the Harmel Report of 1967. Today, we are praising this document on the "Future Tasks of the Alliance" as a far-sighted analysis. Some even see it as the beginning of a process that ultimately led to the end of the Cold War. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The paper was an exercise in damage-limitation. The trouble with France had left the Alliance adrift. It needed to re-assert itself, and the Harmel Report helped achieving this. But we should never forget that it was a document born out of NATO's deepest crisis.

Fast forward to 1982. NATO's "Double Track" decision about deploying intermediate range nuclear missiles in response to Soviet deployments resulted in unprecedented public protests throughout Europe. Paranoid theories about "Euroshima" were making the rounds. The crisis almost toppled some European governments. Transatlantic relations were under tremendous strain. *The Economist* saw the Atlantic Alliance "in the early stages of what could be a terminal illness". In the end, the Soviets gave in to NATO's demands — a step that in retrospect might have been the true beginning of the end of the Cold War. But NATO had paid a high price. By trying to restore deterrence, NATO had neglected to reassure its own populations.

On to the Balkans. Today, with Southeast Europe largely pacified, and with several countries of the region now members of NATO, it is tempting to see NATO's Balkan engagement as a success story. Yet it didn't look like that at all at the beginning. Initially, the Allies were hesitant to get involved. And for some pundits, this hesitation to address a pressing European security challenge amounted to nothing less than the end of the Alliance. For example, the former Director of the IISS, Christoph Bertram, argued in 1994 that NATO was in terminal decline and probably would not even reach the end of the decade.

The terrorist attacks of "9/11" were another case of a crisis turning into an opportunity. When NATO invoked Article 5, the US told its Allies "the mission determines the coalition" — and NATO was not the coalition that Washington had in mind. In the end, however, NATO as a whole assumed command of ISAF in Afghanistan — a step that effectively ended NATO's "Eurocentrism". Without the crisis provoked by "9/11", NATO would not have made the transition from a geographical to a functional understanding of security.

Two years later, we entered what was perhaps the worst crisis since the 1960s: The Iraq war. It threatened to tear NATO apart. The US Secretary of Defense started to divide Europe into "old" and "new". Many observers, including a Brookings researcher named Ivo Daalder, argued that the end of Atlanticism had finally arrived. In a similar vein, the British *Times* mused about the "slow death" of NATO.

Everyone was worried — well, *almost* everyone. In a brainstorming with NATO Ambassadors, veteran journalist Jim Hoagland advised his audience to take it easy. The transatlantic relationship, he said, had weathered many storms before, and it would weather the current one as well. And, jokingly, he admitted that he himself may have contributed to previous disasters: "Whenever we have a slow news day at the Washington

Post”, he quipped, “we publish a piece on the crisis of NATO”. Hoagland was right. The transatlantic relationship recovered. As Lord Robertson put it later, the crisis had hit NATO hard, but it was a hit “above, and not below the waterline”.

Why did the Cassandras always get it wrong? I believe that there are three reasons why:

First, they misunderstand political *disagreements* as a sign of Alliance *fatigue*. Yet disagreements are part and parcel of managing an Alliance. This can be frustrating at times — but, at the end of the day, this is the way towards a new consensus. Besides, has anyone ever said that managing an Alliance was easy?

Second, they misunderstand debate about the future *course* of the Alliance as a fundamental disagreement over NATO’s *value*. Again, a common mistake when judging the state of NATO or the transatlantic community. We argue over NATO’s course precisely *because* we value NATO so much. If NATO were irrelevant, we would not bother arguing over its course.

Thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, the Cassandras consistently underestimate the pressure imposed on us by a rapidly changing security environment. Simply put, the transatlantic community always had a full plate of security challenges to meet, and tackling these challenges in a team was always preferable to trying to tackle them alone.

Does this ensure that the Cassandras will *always* have it wrong? Is the transatlantic security partnership on “autopilot”: always self-regulating, always finding a new balance?

Of course not. The transatlantic security partnership is not invulnerable. It can die of neglect — by one or both sides. It can atrophy, because the successor generations fail to grasp the importance of the cooperative network built by their predecessors. And, of course it can be damaged by acrimonious rhetoric over “unfair” burden sharing, alleged “value gaps”, or other grievances. All of this *could* happen — it’s just not likely to happen.

We can argue about differences in worldview, values, or political style — and yet the fact remains that no two continents are more alike in all of these characteristics than Europe and North America.

We can employ the most self-assertive rhetoric about the one not needing the other — and yet the fact remains that our open and free societies share vulnerabilities that force us to work together, no matter how difficult this may be.

And we can lament as much as we want the wasted opportunities on free trade or the environment — yet there is no escaping the fact that if we want to shape our current security environment in line with our values and interests, we can only do so together.

This environment is no less dangerous — and far more unpredictable — than anything we faced since the founding of NATO in 1949, or the founding of the Netherlands Atlantic Association in 1952.

Today’s security environment is characterised by renewed great power competition; by the return of Russian militarism; and by the threat of a new nuclear arms race in Asia. It is

characterised by endemic instability from the Maghreb to the Middle East to Central Asia; and by hybrid warfare, be it through sophisticated cyberattacks or fake news spread on social media. And it is characterised by the emergence of new technologies that raise the spectre of terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction, and “lone wolves” who are manufacturing their own guns with their 3-D printer in the basement.

In short, this environment does not let us off the hook. Europe and North America simply cannot afford to go their separate ways. If we fail to shape events together, then we will become their victims. NATO’s agenda clearly reflects this logic.

By providing for the collective defence in the East, NATO draws a clear “red line” to Russian adventurism. By projecting stability to the South, NATO plays its share in supporting the long-term transformation of Europe’s troubled neighbourhood. By improving our ability to deal with hybrid warfare and cyberattacks, we are enhancing the collective resilience of the transatlantic community to 21st century threats. And by cultivating our partnerships with nations and organisations from Europe to Northern Africa, and from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific region, we are maintaining the unique network that is of crucial importance for meeting the challenges of globalisation.

NATO’s agenda demonstrates that — all rhetoric aside — Europe and North America remain one single security space. This is why the Netherlands Atlantic Association can celebrate its 65th anniversary with confidence. If NATO has weathered many storms, it was not least because a group of firm believers in the transatlantic project supported it. The Netherlands Atlantic Association can take pride of its role in keeping the flame of Atlanticism alive.

I wish you — and NATO — all the best for the next 65 years.

Thank you.

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