

Challenges within and outside the alliance

An appraisal of the Warsaw Summit

Leo Michel

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity ...”

The opening lines of Charles Dickens’ 19th century masterpiece, *A Tale of Two Cities*, seem eerily appropriate to describe transatlantic relations in the summer of 2016. NATO’s July 8-9 Warsaw Summit exceeded expectations of many defense and foreign affairs *cognescenti*. But it was bracketed by the victory of the “Brexit” camp in the June 23 U.K. referendum — which might yet prove to be a serious self-inflicted wound for one of NATO’s most capable allies — and by the horrific, possibly ISIS-inspired “lone-wolf” attack in Nice on July 14 and, one day later, the bloody but ultimately failed military coup attempt in Turkey.

It’s an imperfect parallel, to be sure. But as in Dickens’ novel, the possibilities of transformation and renewal (in this case, within the Atlantic alliance) coexist with serious, sometimes violent challenges to the prevailing political and social order within several of its member states.

First, the positive news: across a range of hard and complex issues, 28 allied heads of state and government managed at Warsaw to balance NATO’s highest priority — strengthening deterrence and collective defense — with its need to respond to crises beyond its borders and, in particular, the terrorist threats emanating from them.

Hence, faced with Russia’s continued annexation of Crimea, destabilizing military presence and support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine, and provocative large-scale military exercises and other activities (such as close-proximity harassment of allied ships and aircraft), NATO agreed on several measures that go beyond its commitments at the September 2014 Wales Summit.

Forward presence

The deployment, beginning early 2017, of four battalion-sized multinational battlegroups (headed by the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada) in the three Baltic states and Poland virtually guarantee that any Russian aggression toward one or more of those allies will quickly meet a collective response. This “forward presence” on NATO’s northeastern flank will complement the Readiness Action Plan approved at Wales, including the new brigade-size Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, now on stand-by and able to be deployed within two to three days, and the enlarged and more flexible NATO Response Force, now a division-size land element with aviation, naval, and special operations forces components.

Additional planning, exercises, and capabilities — including in the domains of command and control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as cyber defense — will be needed to ensure seamless cooperation among the host nations and these various forces. And more work will be necessary to ensure their rapid reinforcement in a region where Russia has steadily improved its “anti-access/area denial” (A2AD) toolbox. Still, as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has pointed out, the forward presence decision is “ground breaking,” especially since “it’s an open-ended commitment and...will last as long as necessary.”

NATO’s plan for a “tailored forward presence” in the Black Sea region is less impressive, in part reflecting Bulgarian and Turkish concerns not to further complicate their relations with Russia. However, the alliance will support a Romanian initiative to “establish a multinational framework brigade to help improve integrated training of Allied units under Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast.” It also will assess “options for a strengthened NATO air and maritime presence” in the region — a complicated task, given Russia’s improved A2AD reach from its installations in Crimea and western Syria.

Nuclear weapons

Meanwhile, in response to multiple instances of “nuclear saber rattling” by President Vladimir Putin and senior Russian officials — as well as hints, in Russia’s last published military doctrine, that Moscow might consider a nuclear escalation strategy to “de-escalate” a conventional conflict — the allies went beyond the somewhat stale formulation on nuclear weapons agreed at Wales. “Any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict,” warned the Warsaw Summit Declaration.

“The circumstances in which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are extremely remote. If the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened, however, NATO has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that an adversary could hope to achieve.”

Left unmentioned in the declaration were various discreet steps taken to: update NATO’s assessments of Russian nuclear capabilities and strategy; improve NATO’s nuclear plans and forces available for nuclear missions to ensure they are both capable and seen as such; better integrate potential nuclear scenarios into NATO exercises involving Article 5 (collective defense) contingencies; and highlight the importance of nuclear responsibility-sharing arrangements, which demonstrate solidarity and strengthen deterrence.

Distinctive approaches

At the same time, the alliance was careful not to ignore its strategic interests in the “arc of insecurity and instability” that extends across northern and eastern Africa, the broader Middle East, and into Afghanistan. But in these volatile regions, the disparate security, economic, and political stakes — and limited expeditionary capabilities — of individual allies make it even harder to reach consensus on decisive collective action. As a result, distinctive approaches are to be applied. Of particular note:

- Buoyed by President Barack Obama’s decision (announced shortly before the Warsaw Summit) to keep some 8,400 US soldiers in Afghanistan through early 2017—his earlier plan called for reducing the US force to 5,500 — NATO and its “operational partners” (such as Georgia, Australia, Finland, and Sweden) committed to maintain some 11,000 military personnel in the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016.¹ Similarly, while the American President has asked Congress for \$3.45 billion in funding for Afghan national security forces in fiscal year 2017, other NATO allies will assume the lion’s share of the additional \$800 million in annual security assistance pledged for those forces by the international community during 2018-2020.
- At Warsaw, NATO agreed, for the first time, to deploy its Airborne Warning and Control aircraft and multinational crews over allied territory (primarily Turkey) and international waters to support the US-led counter-ISIS coalition’s air operations over Syria and Iraq. In addition, NATO will transfer its training course for Iraqi officers from Jordan to Iraq, complementing efforts by individual allies to enhance Iraqi national security capabilities (including those of Iraqi Kurds) and assist that country’s security sector reforms.
- The Summit Declaration put the entire alliance on record as supporting full implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between the “EU3 plus 3” (United Kingdom, France, Germany, United States, Russia, and China) and Iran. This was an important display of solidarity among the allies, given their competing domestic pressures to normalize trade and financial relations with Iran. But by announcing the Initial Operational Capability of NATO’s ballistic missile defense system, including the transfer of command and control of the Aegis Ashore site in Romania from the United States to NATO, the allies also sent a strong message to Iran (and other states posing proliferation concerns) that NATO territory, populations, and forces are becoming less vulnerable to intimidation or attack by those countries’ ballistic missile programs.

NATO-EU strategic partnership

Among the Summit’s less heralded accomplishments was its robust call to “give new impetus and new substance” to the NATO-EU “strategic partnership.” Despite selective improvements since its formal declaration in late 2002, that partnership has unquestionably failed to reach its full potential.² In their separate statement at Warsaw, Stoltenberg, European Council President Donald Tusk, and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker cited seven specific areas of new or intensified cooperation relevant to common security challenges in the “east” (such as “hybrid” threats and cyber defense) and “south” (such as migration, terrorism, and security capacity-building.)

The results of this initiative are sure to be uneven, as demonstrated by behind-the-scenes wrangling over NATO's maritime support for EU efforts to restrict migration in the eastern Mediterranean. But there's growing evidence that the shopworn, quasi-theological debates over defending NATO or EU "autonomy" attract a diminishing audience within both organizations, while advocates of pragmatic cooperation are increasing their political and bureaucratic clout.³

Transatlantic relations outside NATO

Ultimately, however, the strength of transatlantic relations cannot depend solely on NATO's performance as an alliance. As the aforementioned developments in the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey illustrate, new forces and actors outside NATO's political-military purview pose real risks for its ability over time to deliver on parts of the Warsaw agenda. To appreciate how (with apologies to Dickens) his descriptors — the "worst of times," "foolishness," and "incredulity" — might play out on both sides of the Atlantic, consider the following.

Notwithstanding the reassuring tone of Prime Minister Theresa May and other senior officials of Her Majesty's new Conservative government, the Brexit decision (assuming, as is likely, that it will be executed over the next two years or so) could impact the alliance in several ways. An extended UK economic slowdown or recession would make it harder for the May government to keep its promise to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defense. Already, the stiff downward pressure on the pound will make the purchase of US or European-made defense products and sustainment of existing and promised British military commitments overseas (for example, on the European continent and in the anti-ISIS coalition) more expensive. And while the May government has reiterated its predecessor's pledge to renew the UK nuclear deterrent with a "like-for-like" fleet of four new "Successor" ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), Brexit has increased the risks of a nightmare scenario. Specifically, the staunchly pro-EU Scottish Nationalists might call a second referendum on independence for Scotland, which they would be better positioned to win than their failed attempt in September 2014. And if they do win, the Nationalists have promised to terminate arrangements, dating from the 1960s, for basing the UK SSBNs and their nuclear warheads on the Scottish west coast — an outcome that many fear would spell the end of the UK's independent nuclear deterrent.

Meanwhile, a wild card of an entirely different nature has emerged in the United States in the form of the Republican Party's presidential candidate, Donald Trump. Already well-known for dismissing NATO as "obsolete" and its members as "free riders," Trump also has proffered a slew of approaches to national security issues — from "bombing the (expletive deleted) out of ISIS," ordering American soldiers to kill the families of terrorists, and barring nearly all Muslim immigrants from the United States to "renegotiating" the "disastrous" nuclear deal with Iran. If carried out, such approaches could provoke an even deeper rift in transatlantic relations than occurred as a result of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. True, it's premature to predict who will win the presidential context on November 8, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, if elected, would not radically alter the main lines of Obama's transatlantic agenda. Still, as the Brexit vote demonstrated in another great democracy, the potential strength of simplistic appeals to an anxious and polarized

electorate — “Make America Great Again” and “America First” — are not to be underestimated.

In Europe, further political and societal upheavals cannot be ruled out, either. President François Hollande, a Socialist, has overseen a broadly positive French engagement within NATO and a markedly improved bilateral defense and military relationship with the United States since taking office in May 2012. But his unpopular economic policies and the recurrence of devastating terrorist attacks (notwithstanding a prolonged “state of emergency” and the extensive employment of regular military forces for internal security missions) make his reelection in May 2017 increasingly doubtful.

Meanwhile, among those competing for the center-right’s presidential nomination, some (like front runner Alain Juppé) have been critical of France’s “reintegration” into NATO military structures in 2009, while others (like former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who decided that move, and Sarkozy’s former Prime Minister and now fierce enemy, François Fillon) have seemed disturbingly indulgent toward Putin’s aggression against Ukraine. Even worse, Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Front, stands to gain the most from growing anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-EU sentiments among the French public. And she has publicly declared her intention, if elected, to withdraw, “without delay,” from NATO’s military structures.

Germany, too, is not immune from internal and external strains. At the European Council meeting in June, Chancellor Angela Merkel again played a critical role in maintaining EU sanctions against Russia (imposed following its intervention in Ukraine in 2014) and their linkage to full implementation of the 2014/2015 Minsk accords, which she helped to broker. But her willingness to take a firm stand regarding Russia, to include offering Germany as a “framework nation” for the NATO multinational battalion to be placed in Lithuania, seemed to be criticized — at least implicitly — by Foreign Minister (and Merkel’s coalition partner) Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who referred to NATO military exercises in eastern Europe as “saber rattling.”

Meanwhile, Merkel’s backtracking on her past, arguably overgenerous welcome of refugees from conflicts in the broader Middle East, Afghanistan, and Africa apparently has not halted the growth of nationalist, anti-immigrant groups like the “Alternative for Germany.” And the Chancellor stands to come under further pressure if, following the failed coup in Turkey and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s further crackdown on his political opposition, the agreement she brokered between the EU and Turkey to stop the refugee and migrant flow to Europe effectively collapses. Sign of the times: with German national elections coming up in the fall of 2017, recent polls indicate that two-thirds of German voters oppose a fourth term for Merkel.

None of this is to say that the worst-case scenario will, in every case, take place. Time and again, the alliance and the broader transatlantic bonds and shared democratic values that serve as its foundation have proved more resilient than its adversaries and detractors predicted. But given the cross-currents of multiple, diverse, and unpredictable challenges facing the alliance, it’s not surprising that the celebratory atmosphere following the Warsaw Summit was remarkably fleeting.

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¹ Of the 9,800 US troops now in Afghanistan, approximately 6,950 serve in Resolute Support; the remainder serve in Operation Freedom's Sentinel, the US counter-terrorism mission aimed at remnants of al-Qaeda and the emerging threat from ISIS-affiliated groups in Afghanistan.

² See: Leo Michel, "European Defense in 2013: An American Perspective," in *Revue de defense nationale* (Summer 2013), accessible online.

³ A similar trend is evident in US bilateral relations with the EU. Note, for example, that the US Combatant Commanders for Europe (EUCOM) and Africa (AFRICOM) have steadily improved their bilateral cooperation and coordination with the EU Military Staff in Brussels and, in some cases, commanders of EU-led operations in the field.