

John Bew and Gabriel Elefteriu | March 2017

# THE UK AND THE WESTERN ALLIANCE

NATO in the new era of realpolitik

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## About the Authors

**John Bew** is the Head of the Britain in the World project at Policy Exchange and Professor of History and Foreign Policy at the War Studies Department, King's College London.

**Gabriel Elefteriu** is a National Security Research Fellow at Policy Exchange.

## Key Points

- On current trends, NATO is weakening at a time when regional and global security challenges are growing. There is a need for a new grand strategic rethink for NATO that addresses its role in the Western alliance more broadly – one that goes beyond practical questions of efficiency, balance sheets and coalition management.
- Britain should make an effort to lead those discussions, by reaffirming its place as NATO's foremost European champion. As the UK urges others to play catch-up on defence, it should retain a lead over the rest of the pack. On the issue of defence spending, its approach should be to "show" rather than "tell", beginning with a symbolic increase above the current commitment of 2% of GDP.
- As was acknowledged at the Newport summit of 2014, a new Strategic Concept is needed for NATO. There have been seven Strategic Concepts in NATO history but the next one must not only go back to first principles but show more appreciation of how the strategic environment has changed. It must consider the likely future trajectory of the Western alliance over the next quarter to half century against the backdrop of instability in other regions (chiefly the Middle East and North Africa) and the rising power of Asia.
- NATO faces an immediate threat from those hostile to the alliance. Russia has broken with previous international agreements in a direct assault on the sovereignty of Ukraine. Benchmarks of the rules-based order in Europe such as the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and the NATO-Russia Foundational Act of 1997 have been flouted. Moscow continues to act in ways designed to undermine NATO allies, using a variety of subversive

methods. Against this growing challenge, NATO is also weakened by the internal fragmentation of the broader Western alliance, which is arguably more strained than at any time for decades.

- A “re-set” of relations between the West and Russia is not beyond the realm of possibility. Some version of this is likely to be attempted by the current US administration. There is more European support (in France, for example) for a rapprochement with Moscow than has been commonly acknowledged. This has caused concern in the UK which has been vocal in its criticism of Russian actions. The only circumstances in which such a “re-set” will be successful is if NATO presents a united front on European security. Rather than watching these developments nervously from the fringes, Britain could do worse than adopt the leitmotif “peace through strength”.
- An emerging problem for NATO is the increasing lack of synchronicity between Washington, D.C, Brussels and other European capitals. This trend precedes the election of Donald Trump as president. In fact, it is partly driven by a long-standing European ambition to achieve “strategic autonomy” from the US, which has increasingly manifested itself both at nation-state and the EU level.
- Political and governance issues developing across NATO’s Eastern flank bring into question the fundamental strategic assumptions made at the time of NATO’s expansion into former Warsaw Pact territory after 1989. To ensure NATO’s continued strategic viability and resilience, an honest, wide-ranging and integrated assessment of NATO’s position in Central and Eastern Europe – from the Baltic to the Black Sea – is required.
- Beyond Central and Eastern Europe, NATO should demonstrate greater willingness to tackle the threat from terrorism and, relatedly, develop a region management strategy which encompasses the Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Attempts to address these problems have suffered from the fact that they fall between the purview of the EU and the decreasing willingness of the US to take a lead in this region. As such, NATO’s future is best served by less emphasis on expanding its membership – as became a goal in itself at the end of the Cold War – and more on dynamic action by its existing members, in the face of a rapidly changing threat environment.
- Notwithstanding the effects of Brexit, NATO is one area in which the UK can still play a “bridging” role. Contrary to the broad consensus in Europe,

the Trump presidency provides a potential opportunity for strengthening NATO by re-injecting it with a healthy dose of political and military realism. Close US-UK relations can be an important vehicle for this. Resorting to cliché about the “special relationship” is counter-productive, however. The time for complacency has now passed.

- The UK is best served by a small-c “conservative” grand strategy when it comes to NATO and European security; it is right to prize the “post-1945 rules based international order” and the Western alliance that underpins it. Nonetheless, the UK must be more radical and bold within those “conservative” parameters.
- Acting as persuader or cajoler of other NATO members to “do more” is one way in which the UK has sought to reassure the US of the long-term viability of the alliance. But this is likely to have limited impact in itself. Unless talk is followed by tangible action, another round of rhetoric on NATO will diminish its authority further. As a political alliance, the efficacy of NATO depends on the political will of its individual nation states as much as appeals to the history of the alliance. Meeting and surpassing defence spending targets is often dismissed by defence experts as “symbolic”. If anything, this is precisely why it is so important.

## Background

The Western alliance built in the wake of the Second World War, and solidified during the Cold War, is coming under strain. America’s international commitments – from NATO to the UN – will undergo an audit over the next four years. Those states that have grown accustomed to operating in the orbit of the American security umbrella are uncertain about how to respond. In an era of shifting power and geopolitical priorities, therefore, one of the longest and most successful alliances in international affairs – that between the US and the UK – is likely to come under more scrutiny than for many years.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, the inadequacy of America’s European allies became a live issue once again. One of the themes of Donald Trump’s campaign was that the costs of America’s commitments to the defence of western Europe were no longer justifiable. Challenging decades of consensus about the importance of NATO, for example, he suggested that the organisation was in danger of becoming “obsolete”. The new President’s apparent determination to seek a rapprochement with Moscow further increased

uncertainty in European capitals about how changes in US foreign policy might change the terms of European security.

To lay this at the door of President Trump alone is wide of the mark. In the last four presidential elections at least, the bloated nature of America's extensive foreign commitments – and the desire to reduce that burden – has been a recurrent theme. Britain's sometimes privileged status has not exempted it from criticism in this respect. In his 2016 interview with David Goldberg in *The Atlantic*, President Obama referred to what he called the “anti-free rider campaign”, singling out European allies for failing to pay their fair share within NATO.

The most recent “Global Trends” report, published by the US National Intelligence Council in January 2017, suggests that the era of a Western-led “rules-based international order” that emerged after 1945 is drawing to a close. It also estimates that the costs of trying to rebuild that order are too high to make it worth the effort, in a period of “slow growth, fiscal limits, and debt burdens”. Against this unpropitious background, however, US-UK relations have, once again, taken on an elevated importance in 2017. Shortly after President Trump's inauguration, Theresa May became the first foreign leader to visit the new administration. The fact that Trump is a self-declared supporter of Brexit has allayed British concerns that it would be put to the “back of the queue” in attempts to secure a trade deal. That Theresa May was able to get the President to publicly commit to being “100% behind NATO” was a testament to the fact that the UK retains some residual influence, even in a period of rapid political change.

Over the longer-term, however, a truly stronger NATO is not one that is destabilised by short-term fluctuations in public opinion or personality clashes. Success should not be measured by past historical standards, set in 1945, or shibboleths from the Cold War era. What matters is how the Western alliance is reshaped and reformed to gird it for forthcoming challenges that will define the twenty-first century.

## Taking the grand-strategic view of NATO

1. NATO provides the ballast of the Western alliance, tying the United States to Europe as part of a commitment to common defence. Without a functional, coherent NATO there is much less substance and resilience to the concept of the West. This has deeper consequences because a divided and weakened West is more vulnerable and less well-equipped to deal with the mounting

challenges facing it in the twenty-first century (both within the Western hemisphere and beyond).

2. There is a growing consensus that too many Western states have allowed their strategic sense to atrophy and too often favour a fire-fighting, crisis management approach to national security.<sup>1</sup> A string of strategic failures, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Russia's resurgence in Europe and the Middle East, bear witness to that. Yet the greatest lapse of strategic thinking in recent decades has been with regards to "the West" itself – on how to preserve the political and strategic cohesion of the Transatlantic alliance.
3. A discussion on the fundamental role of NATO in ensuring the West's security and stability in the international system is overdue. Many of the old assumptions underlying the Alliance have become frayed. An opportunity for this rethink was missed at the end of the Cold War when NATO's role began to change de facto, because of the altered circumstances in which it was operating. To some extent, it has been a victim of its own success. The long-running and singular focus on NATO's operational challenges – and spending levels – has obscured important grand strategic questions regarding NATO's place and function in the Western alliance more broadly.
4. NATO is a politico-military alliance, not just a military one. In 1949, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson fought a hard battle with the US Senate to get the NATO treaty approved, and could only succeed after satisfying US lawmakers that the treaty did not bind America to an "automatic" entry into any future war. Acheson's argument was that the terms of the treaty created a "moral obligation" – not a legal one – but that, given the importance of the issue at hand for world peace, in this case "moral and legal are the same thing". In the debate over members' "obligations" to each other it is often forgotten that the entire architecture depends on political will and moral commitments to our allies. Article 5 is binding, but not specific on what actions should be taken in case of attack. We should be careful indeed, on both sides of the Atlantic, about the extent to which we allow our moral commitments to each other to erode.

## NATO and the EU: a problem of synchronicity

5. NATO has an EU problem. It is political in nature and rests on the fact that many within the EU see the Union as an alternative to American – and now British – influence in the European neighbourhood. Strategic autonomy is increasingly important to that EU vision.

6. The Western or Transatlantic alliance designed in the post-war years was built on a fundamental strategic assumption: America would provide a security umbrella so that Europe could rebuild its political systems and economies after the devastation of the Second World War. The shared end goal was to see the flowering of stable, successful and wealthy democracies. A stronger, safer and more prosperous West was seen as a shared interest. This informed much of Western strategy during the Cold War.
7. This project has, to some extent, been the victim of its own success. Partly through accidents of history, a competing political force to American-led NATO has gradually emerged. It is reflected in the expansion of the EU, with: its stated desire for “strategic autonomy” from the United States; aspirations to a “global strategy”; and a plan for a common EU defence. The formation of NATO did not provide for this eventuality, even though more European economic integration and political harmony was always the desired end goal – for the US as much as any European state. Certain versions of the EU in the future – such as the commitment to “ever closer union” – run against some of the assumptions that have underpinned NATO.
8. Until recently, Brussels’ stated policy position was that EU defence would be realised “within NATO”. European defence integration, officials said, was necessary in order to reduce waste and “take more responsibility” – and of course for the purposes of advancing the federalist project. Until recently, however, thanks largely to Britain’s efforts, there was recognition of NATO’s primacy in European defence.
9. Brexit has changed much of this calculus in the EU. With British resistance (almost) out of the way, some EU leaders are now discussing schemes of European defence integration which raise the prospect of an EU Army. The most recent manifestation of this sentiment can be seen in the 2017 Munich Security Conference Report. This called on EU members to “set aside” concerns that investing in EU defence schemes would divert resources away from NATO, on the grounds that it was now time for “Brussels’ clout in the world” to be “top of the menu”.<sup>2</sup> A desire to distance the EU from Donald Trump’s America may encourage this trend further.
10. Much hangs on the strategic decisions made by the EU27 in the next few months. It is important to understand that the development of the EU army idea will be driven by the primacy of European politics rather than concerns about the future of NATO. Will the federalist camp within the EU seize the initiative to press for further EU integration across the board (including defence), i.e. “more Europe”? Or will other countervailing, constructive-

reformist forces combine to blunt the federalist impetus, allowing for a more flexible structure that leaves room and incentives for continued (and perhaps stronger, again, down the line) US and UK cooperation?

11. The essential problem Europe will have in attempting to break free from US “diktats” (the word used by Jean Claude Juncker in a speech in Passau in October 2015<sup>3</sup>) will be that of nuclear deterrence. Who will provide the nuclear deterrence that a “strategically autonomous” Europe will need against Russian nuclear capacity; not to mention the other strategic capabilities (such as stealth aviation or certain space capabilities) which are needed to counter conventional Russian power? This nuclear question is already being asked in Germany<sup>4</sup> and Poland<sup>5</sup>, but there is, as yet, no definitive answer to it. What is clear is that discussions on EU defence continue to be driven by political dynamics within the EU rather than genuine strategic calculations. In the short-term, this gives those who prefer to focus on the reinforcement of NATO a decisive advantage.

## NATO's Eastern Question

12. NATO faces a subsidiary strategic problem in Central and Eastern Europe. The narrow focus on military spending and on Western-led efforts to establish effective deterrence in the area obscures deeper questions about the ways in which East European members strengthen or weaken NATO overall – and how this might be addressed.
13. A number of political and governance problems are developing across NATO's Eastern flank in recent years. These bring into question fundamental assumptions made at the time of NATO's expansion eastwards after the Cold War. There seems to be an insufficient awareness and understanding among Western policy-makers of the underlying political and security trends in the states on the Alliance's Eastern frontier, which carry potential risks as well as costs of opportunity. A wholesale, clear-eyed and honest assessment – a “health check” – is required of Central and Eastern Europe's overall situation.
14. The risks, from a NATO point of view, are tied to the erosion of democratic standards in the region, with such concerns spreading from Hungary to Poland and, most recently, Romania. This could feed into further political instability. In conjunction with rising Euroscepticism and/or populism, exacerbated further by widespread corruption, this amplifies local NATO member states' vulnerability to Russian propaganda and other subversive tactics. This is a

slow-burning process but one which requires attention. Moscow's role in the foiled coup plot in Montenegro last year serves as a warning in this regard.

15. For the UK, there may be a constructive role to play in Central and Eastern Europe, by constructively addressing a growing vacuum of EU leadership in a key part of Europe. For NATO, more broadly, a renewed effort to strengthen Central and Eastern members politically and militarily – as a matter of strategic necessity – could provide new “common ground” among its key alliance members. Such an effort would nonetheless require more willingness to deploy more political capital, attention and resources to the region.
16. The West has a key role to play as a strong guiding hand to these Central and Eastern European states through these challenges, as it has done before. Many of those in Central and Eastern European states – among the populace as much as the political elites – look to the West for such support. But “which” West? Should it be the EU, with its own set of interests, carrots and sticks to offer its Central and Eastern members? Or the United States, with its leadership of NATO but also with its bi-lateral strategic alliances across Central and Eastern Europe, especially with Poland and Romania which host permanent American missile defence facilities (with the Polish site set to be completed in 2018)? The US is seen in the East as the best guarantor – both on a political and on a military level – against Russian aggression. But the EU is seen as vital for economic development.
17. There is a further complication in this region. There is competition for NATO deployments between the two sides of the “Eastern frontier”: the Baltic and the Black Sea. Each NATO summit in recent years has been approached, by Eastern members, in terms of what military commitments from Western allies they would “obtain” for their own region. A strong NATO focus on the Baltic area has created, at times, feelings of despondency in the south of the eastern flank, especially in Romania, which not unreasonably considers it should receive a greater share of NATO attention than it currently does given Russian military activity in next-door Ukraine. A less divided eastern NATO frontier – with fewer concerns by some about being left behind – would be even better for the viability of the NATO alliance, and for discouraging anyone looking to test its collective will.
18. Consolidating NATO's eastern frontier from the Baltic to the Black Sea, politically and militarily, should be a policy priority. British leadership is well-suited to this purpose, in tandem with the US. One important instrument London can potentially leverage – beyond diplomatic and military support – is

UK foreign aid, which could also help offset Central and Eastern European loss of EU funding as a result of Brexit.<sup>6</sup>

19. In conclusion, there is a need for a new NATO strategy that looks at Central and Eastern Europe collectively, but the starting point should be a thorough, realistic assessment of local politico-military conditions and vulnerabilities.

## Britain's role, US-UK relations, and the "Trump effect"

20. Since 1945, the United States has taken on the mantle of "leader of the free world" and many states in Europe, including the United Kingdom, have grown comfortable, and perhaps complacent, in the expectation that this will continue. However, the last two presidents of the United States have raised serious concerns about the willingness of America's allies, particularly those in Europe, to play their part as burden-sharers in the preservation of Western peace and security. Meanwhile, there are those in Europe tempted to bet on the idea that the "American century" has passed. It has become fashionable in some quarters to suggest that leadership of the free world might now pass to Germany, as the era of "Pax Anglo-Saxonica" begins to fade. This leaves the UK in an awkward position.

21. Although the term "special" is now somewhat hackneyed, the US-UK relationship partnership is certainly distinctive in its depth and longevity. The London-Washington connection lies at the very heart of the post-1945 international order. No two nations did more to create that order – predicated on a combination of power and rules – and no two nations have been so much invested in its preservation for the last seventy years. In the course of America's rise to superpower status, the UK has become increasingly dependent on American power. Yet it is equally true that Britain – the superpower of the nineteenth century – bequeathed elements of a global system, and a certain worldview, that have had an important influence on America's approach to international affairs.

22. President Trump has been criticised for his labelling of NATO as "obsolete". Since that statement, however, he has made clear that his intention was to provoke a reaction among member states. In fact, after much fretting in European capitals, the three most senior national security positions in the Trump administration are now filled by people who are straightforwardly committed to NATO (with caveats) and have expressed their support for different iterations of the "liberal international order" – the death of which has

been repeatedly declared since November last year. They are more convinced of the need to take a firm line against Russian expansionism, for example, than two of the three French presidential candidates at the time of writing. In Rex Tillerson at the State Department and James Mattis at the Pentagon, Trump had already placed two relatively uncontroversial figures in the highest office of state who hold largely conventional views of the United States' role in the world. The arrival of General H.R. McMaster in the White House as the new National Security advisor has completed this triumvirate.

23. Senior Americans are now willing to ask questions about NATO in public that have been asked in private for years. Yet, that is not the same thing as giving up on the whole concept of NATO. As an indication of his strong support for NATO, McMaster recently recommended *The Unquiet Frontier*, a 2016 book by Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell, which calls for the strengthening and support of America's alliance system, particularly on the frontiers of western power.<sup>7</sup> In recent remarks in London, McMaster stressed the importance of "forward positioning of forces" – in Europe and elsewhere – on the grounds that "deterrence by denial is what is effective." He also emphasised the need to "think in competitive terms again", citing a growing American recognition of the "serious political competitions underway for regional and strategic dominance".<sup>8</sup>
24. Regardless of Trump's definition of "obsolete", in fact, his statement carries an important point. Of the two core elements of the Transatlantic alliance – the European framework for economic prosperity; and the NATO framework for defence – one has undergone a fundamental transformation in the last few decades. The other, NATO, has not. While the political purpose of the EU has evolved rapidly, the foundational principles of NATO have become somewhat blurred. If NATO is to be reformed and reinforced, it will have to be on the basis of a new political consensus. Among other things, the United States will need to feel that it is getting a fairer deal out of the arrangement.
25. The UK should be at the forefront of discussions about the future of NATO, even if this means confronting some difficult home truths. Hard questions need to be asked about NATO's future purpose and potential value to the West in the next quarter to half century. Confining the debate merely to a discussion about current levels of defence spending is choosing to ignore the political elephant in the room: EU aspirations to strategic autonomy from the US and, more so after Brexit, the UK.
26. More burden-sharing by NATO allies is, without question, a good thing. Nonetheless, the prospect of European states taking more responsibility for

self-defence is potentially a double-edged sword. A hypothetical future with European states actually meeting the 2% defence target may aggravate the problem of synchronicity between NATO and the EU.

27. The consequences of a shifting balance of power within NATO should also be considered. To take another hypothetical scenario, a Germany spending 2% on defence would have a considerably bigger defence budget than the UK, without having to spend much of it on a nuclear deterrent. The re-portioning of military power within Europe is likely, over the longer-term, to have political consequences. Questions about the future of NATO should be tied to a broader discussion on what type of Europe the UK wants to see.<sup>9</sup>
28. Without an attempt to navigate these competing political trends, frictions between Europe and the US will only grow in a way that emboldens rivals and enemies. A more comprehensive formulation of the EU-NATO strategic partnership seems to be in order, alongside a re-definition of NATO's own core tasks to reflect both internal political challenges and external security threats. All this points to the necessity of agreeing a new NATO Strategic Concept.
29. There is a danger that European interpretations of President Trump's views on foreign policy might swing from one extreme to the other: from alarm at his initially dismissive and non-committal attitude to NATO, to a false sense of security now that reassurances have been made by his national security team. It is probably a mistake to believe that the "Trump scare" on NATO has passed entirely. In essence, the President has a different view of America's role in the world than his predecessors: one that prizes loyalty and pro-activity in US allies above all else. Added to that is the widespread, high-level European political aversion to Trump's views on a range of other issues.
30. To conclude, NATO's political problems require political solutions, and the UK should seek to lead the way in addressing them on four fronts:
  - **Grand strategy and high politics.** This should involve a renewed emphasis on NATO institutional reform, with the goal of reconciling the European and American poles of political power that have developed in European defence. This would seek to place the EU-NATO relationship on a clearer footing, as well as drawing clearer lines of responsibility within NATO, via a new Strategic Concept.
  - **Geo-strategy and region management.** This should involve: first, a NATO-level strategy to consolidate politically and militarily the Alliance's east European frontier, which should be part of the next Strategic Concept;

second, leading a discussion on how NATO can do more on counter-terrorism and stabilisation of the MENA region (areas of priority concern for the US administration but ones which also require more EU attention).

- **Changing the narrative around the Western alliance.** The only way to discourage the more advanced plans for EU defence integration is to demonstrate the continued endurance of NATO. Against the backdrop of political distancing between the EU and the US, the obstacles to creating a whole new system of defence and deterrence in Europe and neighbouring regions are formidable. By underlining this shared interest, the UK can serve a broader purpose by preventing a deeper rupture developing between the EU and US, which leaves it weakened.
- **Rediscovering its role as the intellectual inspiration and guiding hand in the formation of NATO.** The UK government should assemble a team of experts to consider the historical and ongoing political purpose of NATO in a way that goes beyond an audit of its technical capabilities. It should host a major conference in London on these larger questions of the politics of NATO, as a rallying call – both domestically and internationally – to think more seriously about long-term national defence and security.

## Endnotes

- 1 | See comments at Policy Exchange by Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, former Director of Army Capabilities Integration Center and Deputy Commanding General, Futures, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 25 January 2017
- 2 | Munich Security Report 2017: "Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order?", p. 16
- 3 | Participation of Jean-Claude Juncker, in the debate entitled "Euro, Russia, Refugees – The future of the European Union" in Passau, Germany, 8 October 2015
- 4 | Andrea Shalal, "German lawmaker says Europe must consider own nuclear deterrence plan", Reuters, 16 November 2016
- 5 | Barbara Wesel, "Poland wants nuclear weapons for Europe", Deutsche Welle, 7 February 2017
- 6 | See John Bew and Gabriel Elefteriu, *Making Sense of British Foreign Policy After Brexit*, 19 July 2016
- 7 | Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)
- 8 | See the address to Policy Exchange by Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, "Future threats and their implications for U.S. Military Strategy", 25 January 2017
- 9 | See recent comments by Malcolm Rifkind in "Trump should be spending on warships, not soldiers", CapX, 1 March 2017

