The Shadow NATO Summit IV
NATO's 360-degree approach to deterrence and collective defence:
over-stretched and under-powered?

9 July 2018
War Studies Meeting Room,
King's College London

Amelia Morgan

I. Introduction

1. On 9 July 2018, the British American Security Information Council, the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security at the University of Birmingham, NATO Watch, and King's College London hosted a conference to discuss the most pressing challenges facing NATO as it approached its upcoming summit in Brussels. The conference was convened to discuss an overarching question: 'Is NATO's 360-degree approach to deterrence and collective defence over-stretched and under-powered?' In an increasingly complex and unstable geopolitical environment and with a myriad of internal challenges threatening NATO cohesion, this was a timely and important opportunity to review the alliance's trajectory.

II. NATO Cohesion: Challenges and Opportunities

2. With 29-member states, each with increasingly divergent approaches, threat perceptions and priorities, it is more difficult than ever for NATO to reach consensus on the challenges facing, and objectives of, the alliance. However, NATO cohesion, a fundamental requirement for successful implementation of its commitments and for effectively tackling new and emerging threats, remains a core priority for the alliance going forward.

3. The themes described below summarize the various internal and external challenges facing NATO as it approached the Brussels summit. Against each some suggestions are offered for how the alliance may respond to these challenges in a post-summit environment:

The Trump Factor

4. Concerns regarding U.S. commitment to NATO have dominated discussions of the alliance since President Trump's entry into office. Trump has adopted an explicitly hostile and transactional approach to the alliance. He has questioned its relevance and challenged member states on their contributions, threatening to either impose conditions

on security guarantees for those paying less than the 2% GDP expenditure target, or to unilaterally withdraw from the alliance altogether. This rhetoric has undermined confidence in U.S. commitments to European security and has shaken trust in the transatlantic relationship.

5. Some attending the conference expressed the view that Trump's concerns are, in part, justified. Several European states are well below the 2% target in their defence spending. However, defence spending is not the sole measurement of defence contributions and to frame it as such provides an incomplete picture of how states contribute to NATO's defence capability and to European security.

6. Trump's behaviour in broader security and trading alliances has also sparked concern. From the Paris Agreement on climate change, to the G7, to the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) on Iran, he has proven himself to be an unpredictable president with seeming opposition to multilateralism and the established rules-based order. Whether Trump's hostile rhetoric is merely that or will translate into explicit challenges to established NATO policy hitherto reached by consensus remains to be seen. However, this rhetoric itself is detrimental to alliance credibility and assurance and may provide a dangerous opportunity for adversaries to capitalise on fissures within the alliance.

7. That being said, President Trump is not the first president to raise the burden-sharing issue. President Obama too voiced concerns about the level of defence spending by some states. These transatlantic frictions have been a present since NATO's inception and the alliance has endured similar storms throughout its history.

8. A key consideration for allies going forward will be how to respond to Trump's challenge. One participant noted that leaders have thus far adopted different approaches, with Merkel standing firm and emphasising notions of western values; May and Macron alternatively opting for a closer personal relationship with Trump in the hope that it will translate into favourable foreign policy outcomes; and Trudeau's non-provocative strategy of going around the American federal government and appealing to civil society and American businesses. None of these approaches has proven to be unequivocally successful and may need to be adapted once Trump's strategy (or lack thereof) becomes apparent.

9. Some participants suggested that in order to maintain Euro-Atlantic relations and cohesion, European states will have to assume a larger proportion of the security burden in their region as part of a short- and long-term Trump appeasement strategy. Other participants questioned both the need to appease Trump and the requirement to enhance the European contribution to security, especially in terms of increasing defence spending.

South-East divide and the 360-degree approach: fit for purpose?

10. NATO also faces the challenge of accommodating the divergent security priorities among its 29-member states. Southern allies generally prioritise action against terrorism and unchecked migration, while Eastern allies are primarily concerned with deterrence and Russia. These differences have grown more stark in recent years, as an assertive Russia and instability across the Middle East and North Africa have oriented NATO to multiple tasks. If the alliance is unable to accommodate these competing priorities, this may weaken NATO solidarity and cohesion at a time when it is most fragile.

11. In an attempt to bridge this divide, the alliance continues to seek a 360-degree approach in which NATO forces are capable of deterring threats from the East *and* engaging with challenges emerging from the South. Participants were divided overwhether this approach is working or is indeed effective. Sceptics argued that it is little more than strategic communication designed to appease southern allies. Optimists, meanwhile, maintained that, while implementation may be imperfect, it is a politically essential narrative to maintain as an assurance mechanism; even if the alliance hasn't been particularly effective in tackling threats from North Africa and the Middle East, NATO needs to articulate resolve and a willingness to address problems in that region.

National domestic pressures

12. The rise of populist and nationalist forces, often with deliberately disruptive anti-establishment agendas, risk challenging collective defence policies in favour of national solutions. This may threaten NATO cohesion and unity in states already under pressure from publics generally averse to increases in defence spending. It may even make NATO's financial ambitions difficult to justify. For these reasons, NATO needs to craft a clear, strong and credible message underscoring the importance of the alliance to their publics and more clearly defining the nature of the threats they face and the appropriate responses the alliance can provide.

Russia

13. Relations between Russia and NATO have deteriorated to record post-Cold War lows. Both sides have competing explanations as why this is the case, but in order to devise an effective Russia strategy, NATO must take into consideration Russian threat perceptions and the underlying causes of Russia's sense of insecurity.

14. Within the alliance, there remain disagreements about the nature of the Russian threat and how to respond to it. While NATO successfully adapted to Russia adventurism in 2014, it has been less successful in countering Russia's hybrid warfare. Encompassing both asymmetrical and non-traditional capabilities, the main aim of this strategy is to identify and exploit weaknesses within and between countries and institutions, to sow discord, to disinform, and to destabilise.

15. Some participants suggested that Russia cannot be deterred, as evidenced by the chemical attacks in the United Kingdom and interference in elections. Others, however, argue that contemporary deterrence is multifaceted and operates on various domains. This is becoming ever-more evident as technological developments and emerging technologies, such as cyber, artificial intelligence, and autonomous systems alter both the political and military fabric of response options. NATO has started to acknowledge this increasingly complex deterrent environment by recognising cyber as a new operational domain.

16. Despite these varying views on how to respond to Russia, most participants agreed that NATO should strive to keep communication channels open with Russia, for dialogue offers low-cost risk management, reducing the likelihood of misperception and miscalculation and avoiding escalation. Furthermore, as Russia remains a key strategic threat for NATO, we should not succumb to the temptation to treat Russia as a homogenous identity, nor should we erroneously draw parallels between today and the Cold War. To do so will result in misinformed, ineffective, and possibly escalatory responses to the Russian threat.

III. Making the case for NATO's resilience

Despite these various strains, suggestions that these are irreversible trends or that NATO's fragmentation is a foregone conclusion are largely overblown because:

17. On balance, it is generally believed the alliance adapted well to a resurgent Russia in 2014 and demonstrated a willingness to address new threats;

18. NATO can reasonably be said to be broadly meeting the needs of its membership;

19. There is no viable practical alternative to NATO in the frame that could replace it, nor is there at present political appetite to build a new Euro-Atlantic security framework of a similar scope and scale to NATO;

20. The alliance has endured transatlantic pressures before and survived. At present, Trump's rhetoric might be hostile, but he has not challenged the alliance in quite the same way as he has other agreements, like the JCPOA;

21. Even if a worst-case scenario materialised in which Trump chooses to unilaterally withdraw from the alliance, this will be extremely difficult to achieve institutionally.