EUROPE 03.04.2017 | Stefanie Babst

Why NATO is not obsolete

A response to Jonathan Power

On 27 February 2017, *International Politics and Society* published the article 'Trump's right about one thing: NATO IS obsolete' by Jonathan Power. The article contains so many false assertions about the history of NATO and its more recent transformation that I feel compelled to rebut some of these 'alternative facts'.

My first question is why the article is headlined 'Trump's right' when the author concedes just a few lines later that the new US administration has completely backtracked on statements President Trump made during his election campaign. Following his inauguration in January, all key representatives of his administration have now underscored America's commitment to NATO: Vice-President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defence James Mattis and even President Donald Trump himself. They have done so publicly and on multiple occasions. So what is the writer trying to say? Is he attempting to make the new US administration 'see the light' again?

Following his inauguration in January, all key representatives of Trump's administration underscored America's commitment to NATO.

Secondly, Power's understanding of European history is highly questionable. According to the article, "a majority of historians ... are convinced that Stalin had no intention of invading Western Europe". In the military archives in Potsdam, Warsaw and other European cities anyone who is interested can read about the specific operations and manoeuvres planned by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. All these plans were directed towards a single goal: in the event of a conflict with the West, the Warsaw Pact – the Eastern Bloc's counterweight to NATO – would respond with surprise attacks involving nuclear strikes on a massive scale. From the dark days of Joseph Stalin to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, the Kremlin's plans did not change one jot.

Thirdly, Power once again (just as he has done in other previously published articles) tries to present NATO's enlargement policy as the cause of "Russia's present day hostility towards the West". Although this interpretation appears to enjoy some popularity among a number of commentators, it is nonetheless false. In fact, every nation has the sovereign right to decide for itself whether it wishes to become a member of an alliance or institution. NATO's enlargement policy is based on this principle of international law. Moreover, even present-day Russia is signed up to the right to self-determination enshrined in the Paris Charter. Unfortunately, in reality the Russian government does almost all it can to deny this very right to its immediate neighbours.

Fourthly, Power maintains that NATO is not truly an "institution of equals". This too is completely untrue. For almost 70 years, the members of the alliance have made decisions by consensus. There has not been a single NATO resolution – whether passed by heads of state, ministers, ambassadors or the smallest of committees – that has not followed the principle of unanimity.

Fifthly, Power claims that NATO is irrelevant when it comes to today's security threats and challenges such as the fight against terrorism or the refugee crisis. This bold claim is also without any foundation. The fact is that over the last 16 years or more NATO has made numerous concrete contributions to the fight against terrorism. From developing the capacity of military forces to counter improvised explosive devices to measures designed to protect civilian populations against terror attacks using weapons of mass destruction, NATO members are collaborating among themselves, as well as with many partner states, on an extensive list of security initiatives.

NATO has made numerous contributions to the fight against terrorism, from developing the capacity of military forces to counter improvised explosive devices to measures designed to protect civilian populations against attacks.

In addition, NATO was responsible for two robust operations in aimed at combatting international terrorism. From 2001 to 2014, the NATO-led ISAF operation with 130,000 troops from 51 countries (not, as Power writes, 40,000 troops from 40 countries) helped Afghanistan to push back the Al Qaeda terrorist network and the Taliban from its territory. Moreover, from 2001 to 2016 NATO ran the maritime operation "Active Endeavour", which successfully prevented terrorist activities in the Mediterranean. Finally, Power appears to have forgotten that NATO is providing intelligence support to the global coalition against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

The alliance is also taking action against illegal immigration and human traffickers. For over a year, NATO ships have been patrolling in the eastern Mediterranean. Working with the Turkish and Greek coastguard agencies, NATO has been able to bring about a sustained reduction in the number of illegal migrants entering Europe and to undermine organised human trafficking in the region.

NATO will continue to exist for as long as Europe and North America agree to adhere to the principle of collective defence.

Sixthly, it is also misleading for Power to claim that there is no UN mandate for the continued NATO presence in Afghanistan. In fact, the NATO-led ISAF operation was based on a UN mandate. Since that operation came to an end in 2014, NATO has been carrying out a training mission (i.e. not a combat operation) in Afghanistan – at the express invitation of the Afghan government. Without NATO's "Resolute Support Mission", Afghanistan would struggle to train the troops it needs to defend itself.

Finally, Power's conclusion that NATO is obsolete and that the EU should therefore assume its role appears to be completely detached from political reality. NATO will continue to exist for as long as Europe and North America agree to adhere to the principle of collective defence and to cooperate on a broad array of security measures. And it is not Jonathan Power who gets to decide whether the alliance is obsolete, but 28 (soon to be 29) democratically elected governments. Given their willingness to continue to invest in the alliance politically, militarily and financially in future, it seems to me that the question about NATO's relevance is, in reality, superfluous.



Stefanie Babst
Brussels

Dr Stefanie Babst has served NATO in various capacities over the past 16 years, including as NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy and, since July 2012, as Head of NATO's Strategic Analysis

Capability for the Secretary General and Chair of the Military Committee. Stefanie holds an M.A. in Political Science and a Ph.D. in Russian Studies and International Law. She is a highly-regarded expert on international security policy.